

# U.S.— CUBAN RELATIONS: A REALIST CASE FOR PRAGMATIC ENGAGEMENT

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# Foreword

This report, sponsored by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, is the product of a set of consultations among a group of scholars, opinion leaders, and foreign policy specialists that took place over the last nine months to develop a proposal for a new way forward in U.S. relations with Cuba.

The project was coordinated by William M. LeoGrande, professor of government at American University, and Geoff Thale, former president of the Washington Office on Latin America and now an independent analyst. In a series of individual discussions, written exchanges, and small group meetings, participants shared views on U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba, including the state of U.S.–Cuban relations, the impact of U.S.–Cuba policy on broader U.S. national interests, and the impact of U.S. sanctions on the Cuban people. Participants also discussed the situation in Cuba itself, including the state of the economy, migration, political rights, and civil rights. The group sought additional input from policymakers, former executive branch officials, and congressional staff. The group's broad consensus is that the national interest of the United States would be better served by resetting U.S. policy toward Cuba, embarking on a path of engagement aimed at eventually normalizing relations.

We recognize that this was not the policy that President Trump pursued in his first term, nor was it a policy supported by key members of the president's current foreign policy team. As of this writing, the new administration has taken several steps toward tightening the embargo but has yet to announce a full-fledged Cuba policy.

Sometimes advancing U.S. interests requires setting aside old animosities and engaging with former adversaries, as President Trump has done by opening negotiations with Syria, as well as continuing talks with Russia, China, and others. The

president defines his “America First” foreign policy as one that champions “core American interests” and “puts America and its interests first.”<sup>1</sup> U.S. policy toward Cuba in recent years has failed that test.

This document lays out the rationale for a new policy that advances U.S. national interests and also takes into account the interests of the Cuban people. It recommends a series of specific policy steps that would address priority issues like mass migration, narcotics trafficking, and the rising influence of U.S. global rivals, both in Cuba and in Latin America, as well as U.S. economic and cultural interests.

This report benefited enormously from the thoughtful comments and suggestions of a great many people with deep experience and insight into U.S.–Cuban relations who graciously shared their expertise and advice with us in the course of this project. They include current and former U.S. government officials — from both the executive and legislative branches — as well as civil society leaders who have been engaged with this issue for many years. We offer special thanks to Ambassador (retired) Jeffrey DeLaurentis, who served as chargé d'affaires in the U.S. Embassy in Havana; Angela Mariana Freyre, former special advisor on Cuba at the National Security Council; Victor Johnson, former staff director for the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs; and Cindy Buhl, former legislative director and foreign policy aide to Congressman Jim McGovern. They read several drafts of this report, and their suggestions improved it considerably. Their participation does not mean that they endorse every argument or recommendation; that responsibly rests with us alone.

We are also grateful to the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft for sponsoring this project and especially to Sarang Shidore, director of the Quincy Institute’s Global

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<sup>1</sup> The White House, “America First Policy Directive to the Secretary of State,” Executive Order 14150, Jan. 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/america-first-policy-directive-to-the-secretary-of-state>.



South program, and Marcus Stanley, director of the Quincy Institute's Studies department, for their support and advice.

# Executive Summary

U.S. policy toward Cuba urgently needs a major reset; a shift toward a policy of pragmatic engagement aimed ultimately at normalizing relations — not as a favor to the Cuban government but because engagement better serves the interests of the United States and the Cuban people. The costs of a policy of isolation and economic pressure have grown too severe to ignore.

Although President Trump has yet to fully define his policy toward Cuba beyond reversing the few steps toward engagement taken by President Biden, some of his advisers have implied that tougher sanctions are coming, extending Trump's first-term policy of "maximum pressure." However, conditions on the ground in Cuba today are far different than when President Trump first took office in 2017. The economic situation is far more desperate, posing increased risks to U.S. national security on three issues that the president has identified as U.S. priorities for the Western Hemisphere: migration, drug trafficking, and the rising influence of Russia and China. Neither maintaining current sanctions nor intensifying them effectively addresses these security priorities. On the contrary, by deepening the current crisis — and potentially precipitating a failed state — sanctions increase the risks to U.S. national security. Mitigating these risks, and helping the Cuban people through the current crisis, requires a different approach.

Cuba is experiencing an unprecedented economic and social crisis rooted in the Cuban government's mismanagement of the economy, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and crippling U.S. economic sanctions. Cubans are enduring shortages of all basic necessities, deteriorating government services, and repeated electrical blackouts.

Cuban society is also undergoing profound social change. The legalization of private enterprises has given rise to a dynamic private sector despite restrictive government regulations. The expansion of internet access and social media has led to a more robust civil society despite government censure and intimidation.

Cuba's crisis is rapidly raising the costs to the United States of its sanctions policy. That policy is stimulating migration, opening the door to geopolitical rivals, hurting U.S. relations with allies, and threatening cooperation with Cuba on issues of mutual interest, including countering narcotics trafficking. As internal processes of change take place in Cuba, disengagement leaves the United States on the sidelines, unable to exercise any positive influence on the trajectory of that change.

The United States needs to take the initiative to reset U.S.–Cuban relations to safeguard U.S. interests and ease the suffering of the Cuban people. The immediate goals of a new policy should be to:

- Relieve migration pressures by making immediate regulatory changes that would encourage the growth of the Cuban private sector and the recovery of the Cuban economy.
- Expand commercial and cultural engagement to compete with the influence of China and Russia.
- End the extraterritorial sanctions that are unnecessarily complicating relations with U.S. allies and partners in Latin America and Europe.
- Reengage with the Cuban government diplomatically to advance cooperation on issues of mutual interest, reduce bilateral tensions, and address human rights and property issues.

The United States should continue to voice support for Cubans seeking to exercise their basic human rights and condemn the Cuban government when it violates those rights. However, demanding Cuban concessions on human rights as a precondition for

improving relations has never worked. No U.S. policy can force the Cuban government to adhere to high standards of human rights, but engagement offers better prospects for improvement because it creates incentives for Havana to be responsive to Washington's concerns. Historically, when bilateral relations have improved, Cuba has been willing to take positive steps on human rights.

A policy of engagement needs to be grounded in realistic expectations. It will not erase the fundamental differences between the United States and Cuba, and it is not an alternative path to regime change. Engagement should be pursued because it serves the national interests of the United States better than hostility and sanctions — a policy with a 60-year track record of failure. Relaxing U.S. sanctions will not solve the Cuban economy's structural problems — only Cubans can do that — but it will contribute to economic recovery, eliminate some obstacles facing the Cuban private sector, and help raise the living standard of the Cuban people.

The pace and extent of engagement ultimately depends on the Cuban government's interest in improving relations. But the initial steps recommended here are ones the United States can and should take unilaterally, because they advance U.S. policy interests and offer the opportunity to set U.S.–Cuban relations on a better path for the future.

## **Introduction**

U.S. policy toward Cuba urgently needs a major reset to mitigate the growing risks to U.S. interests caused by the current crisis on the island. The best alternative is a policy of pragmatic engagement aimed ultimately at normalizing relations — not as a favor to the Cuban government but because engagement better serves the interests of the United States and the Cuban people than a policy of isolation and economic pressure, the costs of which have grown too severe to ignore.

Although President Trump has yet to fully define his policy toward Cuba beyond reversing the few steps toward engagement taken by President Biden, some of Trump’s advisers have implied that tougher sanctions are coming, extending his first-term policy of “maximum pressure.”<sup>2</sup> However, conditions on the ground in Cuba today are far different than when President Trump first took office in 2017. The economic situation is far more desperate, posing increased risks to U.S. national security on three issues that the president has identified as U.S. priorities for the Western Hemisphere: migration, drug trafficking, and the rising influence of what U.S. Southern Command calls our “strategic competitors,” Russia and China.<sup>3</sup> Neither maintaining current sanctions nor intensifying them effectively addresses these security priorities. On the contrary, by deepening the current crisis — and potentially precipitating state failure — sanctions increase the risks to U.S. national security. Mitigating these risks, and helping the Cuban people through the current crisis, requires a different approach.

A policy based on intensive sanctions stimulates migration by making living conditions intolerable. It empowers both China and Russia to build influence in Havana and elsewhere in Latin America at our expense. It limits U.S.–Cuban cooperation on issues of mutual interest from narcotics control and migration to environmental protection. It restricts the right of U.S. residents to travel and excludes U.S. businesses from competing in the Cuban market in areas ranging from strategic minerals to biotechnology. It also puts us at odds with allies and partners in Latin America and Europe, none of which support it and chaff under its extraterritorial provisions.

Despite these costs, the policy of sanctions has achieved none of Washington’s policy objectives. It has failed to bring about regime change, democratic reform, or human rights improvement. Designed to produce enough economic pain to destabilize the

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<sup>2</sup> Nora Gámez Torres, “Things Are About to Get a Lot Worse in Cuba: Trump’s Crackdown Plans Explained,” *Miami Herald*, April 10, 2025, <https://www.miamiherald.com/article303759216.html>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Southern Command, “Statement of Admiral Alvin Holsey Commander, United States Southern Command Before the 119th Congress Senate Armed Services Committee 13 February 2025,” [https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/Posture%20Statements/2025\\_SOUTHCOM\\_Posture\\_Statement\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/Posture%20Statements/2025_SOUTHCOM_Posture_Statement_FINAL.pdf).

Cuban government, U.S. sanctions have been catastrophic for the Cuban people but not transformative for Cuba.

For years, both Democratic and Republican presidents have judged these foreign policy costs to be outweighed by the domestic political cost of changing Cuba policy. Simply put, it was not worth the trouble. There was no Cuban crisis that demanded the president's attention and response. Until now. A crisis has been building in Cuba and has reached unprecedented proportions, endangering U.S. national interests and devastating the well-being of the Cuban people.

## **The Cuban crisis and its dangers**

Cuba is experiencing a profound, unprecedented economic and social crisis. Cubans are enduring shortages of all basic necessities — food, medicine, and fuel — producing sharp declines in domestic production and rolling electrical blackouts. Government services — health care, education, and public safety — have deteriorated dramatically, deeply eroding the Cuban people's standard of living.<sup>4</sup> While the Cuban government remains firmly in control, the dramatic nationwide protests that began on July 11, 2021, bore witness to rising popular discontent over deteriorating living conditions, as have the local protests that have been common since. The government has responded by stepping up pressure on non-state media and tightening restrictions on the private sector.<sup>5</sup>

The contemporary crisis is rooted in the Cuban government's mismanagement of the economy, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and crippling U.S. economic

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<sup>4</sup> William M. LeoGrande, "Cuba's Humanitarian Crisis," *The Nation*, Jan. 1, 2025, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/cubas-humanitarian-crisis>.

<sup>5</sup> Nora Gámez Torres, "Despite Worsening Economy, Cuba Announces Crackdown on Growing Private Sector," *Miami Herald*, July 17, 2024, <https://www.miamiherald.com/article290173099.html>; David C. Adams, "The Crackdown on Cuba's Independent Press," *Columbia Journalism Review*, Sept. 13, 2024, [https://www.cjr.org/the\\_media\\_today/cuba-crackdown-lazaro-yuri-valle-roca-miami-exile.php](https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/cuba-crackdown-lazaro-yuri-valle-roca-miami-exile.php).



sanctions. Whether it is predominantly the fault of the Cuban government's own policy or U.S. sanctions, the crisis still poses a threat to U.S. security interests.

In the midst of this crisis, Cuban society is undergoing profound change. The legalization of private enterprises has given rise to a dynamic private sector that is growing rapidly despite restrictive government regulations. The expansion of internet access and social media has led to a more robust civil society in which independent voices — from artists to youth and LGBTQ activists, Afro-Cuban advocates, and Evangelical Christians — have become more vocal and persistent, despite government censure and intimidation.<sup>6</sup>

Cuba's economic crisis and rapid social change are significantly raising the costs of U.S. sanctions policy, which remains in place by dint of inertia rather than any rational calculation of interests. Our inaction worsens our own migration challenges, leaves us less able to compete with geopolitical rivals, hurts our alliances, and threatens our ability to pursue our own goals on counter-narcotics, law enforcement, and cooperation on other issues of mutual interest. As Cuba changes, inaction leaves us on the sidelines, unable to engage effectively with Cuban society or exercise any positive influence on the trajectory of that change.

## The migration crisis

The economic and social crisis has produced the largest migration in Cuban history — nearly a million people in the past three years, 75 percent of whom have come to the United States, with rising numbers risking their lives on rafts at sea. Cuban migration has been a major contributor to irregular arrivals on the U.S. southern border, putting enormous pressure on receiving localities.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Armando Camacho Costales, "The Impact of a New Internet on the Cuban Public Sphere," Columbia Law School, Cuba Capacity Building Project, Nov. 22, 2021, <https://horizontecubano.law.columbia.edu/news/impact-new-internet-cuban-public-sphere>.

<sup>7</sup> Nora Gámez Torres, "Cuba Admits to Massive Emigration Wave: A Million People Left in Two Years amid Crisis," *Miami Herald*, July 19, 2024, <https://www.miamiherald.com/article290249799.html>.

The surge in Cuban migration is also impacting other countries, especially Brazil and Mexico, both of which vocally oppose U.S. sanctions because they aggravate Cuba's crisis, and both of which are important partners for the United States on a wide range of hemispheric issues. Mexico, in particular, is an indispensable partner for managing irregular migration generally and for addressing the flow of illegal drugs into the United States.

## The rising influence of China and Russia

With international tensions on the rise, the United States is especially concerned about its global rivals, China and Russia, expanding their influence in Latin America, as detailed in the annual Posture Statements from the U.S. Southern Command over the past several years. U.S. policy toward Cuba has left these rivals an open door. Cuba is in desperate need of international assistance. Beijing and Moscow have taken advantage of the opportunity to deepen their ties with Havana by increasing economic aid and, to some degree, military and intelligence cooperation.<sup>8</sup> Cuba and Russia have a "strategic partnership," and Cuba has participated in China's Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure development strategy. Although these relationships do not yet represent major investments by Russia or China, current U.S. policy provides them with fertile ground for growth.

This is particularly significant because Cuba holds the world's third-largest reserves of cobalt, along with substantial deposits of nickel — essential strategic minerals for the production of electric vehicles, semiconductors, and integrated circuits.<sup>9</sup> Cutting ourselves off from these markets while allowing competitors to have unfettered access is not in the U.S. interest.

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Southern Command, "Statement of Admiral Alvin Holsey."

<sup>9</sup> Maria Victoria Andarcia, "Cuba Wants to Increase Nickel and Cobalt Production and Take Advantage of Rising Prices," Universidad de Navarra, Center for Global Affairs and Strategic Studies, March 2, 2022, <https://en.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/cuba-quiere-aumentar-su-produccion-de-niquel-y-cobalto-y-aprovechar-el-alza-de-precios>.

The United States is a far more attractive economic partner for Cuba and could easily outcompete China and Russia, especially with the Cuban American community in the lead. But current U.S. policy fails to make effective use of our advantages in trade and investment and also in the social and cultural spheres. The cultural ties between Cuba and the United States are far deeper than those it has with China or Russia, but U.S. sanctions that inhibit travel and academic and cultural exchanges prevent us from taking advantage of them. Greater economic and cultural engagement would give Cuba an incentive to limit military and intelligence relationships detrimental to the United States.

## The damage to counter-narcotics cooperation and other issues of mutual interest

The United States and Cuba have some two dozen bilateral agreements on issues of mutual interest, ranging from migration, counter-narcotics, and law enforcement to environmental protection, public health, and more. Dialogue on these agreements has been limited in recent years, apart from the semiannual meetings on migration and continuing counter-narcotics cooperation. Many of these agreements focus on problems that are transnational and can only be effectively addressed through cooperation.

As Cuba's crisis deepens, the state's capacity for cooperation is deteriorating. Domestic crime and corruption are on the rise, and drug use is increasing.<sup>10</sup> If Cuba is unable to effectively continue counter-narcotics cooperation, the Caribbean could once again become a major drug trafficking route, as it was in the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, the combination of declining state capacity and increasing corruption creates a potentially fertile environment for transnational crime to exploit, as has happened in other Caribbean countries. If the United States hopes to continue the fruitful cooperation that

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<sup>10</sup> Nora Gámez Torres, "Illegal Drug Use and Violent Crime Are on the Rise amid Crisis, Cuba's Leader Admits," *Miami Herald*, July 24, 2024, <https://www.miamiherald.com/article290353439.html>.

we have had with Cuba on counter-narcotics and law enforcement generally, even deeper engagement and assistance on these issues will be needed.

## The strain on U.S. alliances and partnerships

Opposition to U.S. sanctions policy is nearly universal in Latin America, interfering with cooperation on a wide range of other issues. President Biden encountered this problem at the 2022 Summit of the Americas, and it has not abated.<sup>11</sup> If U.S. policy remains unchanged, President Trump will face serious criticism at the upcoming summit in Nov. 2025.

The extraterritorial dimensions of U.S. sanctions have negative consequences for U.S. allies in both Latin America and Europe, while also contributing to Cuba's economic crisis. Title III of the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act has been an irritant in U.S. relations with Europe ever since 1996, when it was adopted.<sup>12</sup> Cuba's unsubstantiated designation as a state sponsor of terrorism punishes European visitors to Cuba by making them ineligible for the Visa Waiver Program to enter the United States, and it impedes European commercial ties with the island. It also places a burden on Cuban nationals in Spain making regular family visits to relatives in the United States. These extraterritorial sanctions serve no U.S. national interest and instead complicate our ability to compete for influence with global rivals.

## The cost to the Cuban people

However one apportions the blame for Cuba's humanitarian crisis, there is no question that U.S. sanctions have made it worse than it would be otherwise. The sanctions still in

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<sup>11</sup> Karen DeYoung, "Biden-Hosted Americas Summit Facing Boycott over Invitation List," *Washington Post*, May 11, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/05/11/us-americas-summit-boycott>.

<sup>12</sup> European Commission, "Joint Statement by High Representative/Vice President Federica Mogherini and Commissioner for Trade Cecilia Malmström on the Decision of the United States to Further Activate Title III of the Helms Burton (Libertad) Act," April 16, 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT\\_19\\_2171](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_19_2171).

place — which limit U.S. and European visitors to Cuba, threaten private investors, and impede international financial transactions, including those involving the private sector — have contributed to the Cuban economy’s collapse. The Biden administration’s approach, which claimed to “support the Cuban people” and advance human rights while being “tough” on the Cuban government, was more of a slogan than a coherent policy and was cruel in its impact on the Cuban people.<sup>13</sup> The United States cannot bankrupt the Cuban government without decimating the island’s economy, immiserating the Cuban people, and spurring migration. Turning Cuba into a failed state does not serve the national interest of the United States.

## **A strategy of engagement**

The United States needs to take the initiative to reset U.S.–Cuban relations to safeguard U.S. interests and ease the suffering of the Cuban people. The immediate goals of a new policy should be to:

- Relieve migration pressures by making immediate regulatory changes that would encourage the growth of the Cuban private sector and the recovery of the Cuban economy.
- Expand commercial and cultural engagement to compete with the influence of China and Russia.
- End the extraterritorial sanctions that are unnecessarily complicating relations with U.S. allies and partners in Latin America and Europe.

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<sup>13</sup> William M. LeoGrande, “By Helping Cuba, Washington Would Be Helping Itself,” *Foreign Policy*, Oct. 22, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/10/22/cuba-united-states-electrical-grid-outage-humanitarian-crisis-migration>.



- Reengage with the Cuban government diplomatically to advance cooperation on issues of mutual interest, reduce bilateral tensions, and address human rights and property claims.

In the long term, engagement should demonstrate the value of normal relations to U.S. interests, building eventually toward establishing fully normal relations and repealing the embargo in its entirety.

## **Policy recommendations: First steps**

The United States should take the initiative to reset relations with Cuba. There is a deep deficit of trust between the two countries, and it was the United States that broke off engagement in 2017. Moreover, the United States is a superpower that can afford to take the risk of holding out an olive branch. For Cuba, every encounter with the United States entails existential danger. Havana's leaders declare that they are open to dialogue with Washington to improve relations. President Trump should put their declarations to the test. Most of the following policy recommendations can and should be undertaken unilaterally, regardless of the Cuban government's response, because they serve U.S. interests, support Cuban civil society, and will reduce the hardships facing the Cuban people.

## **Addressing migration and the humanitarian crisis**

The U.S. policy of hostility and isolation toward Cuba has deepened the economic crisis, driving migration as more and more Cubans find life intolerable. To help Cubans find hope for the future at home, the United States should expand support for the emergent Cuban private sector to help jump-start the economy, end sanctions that are impeding economic recovery, and work with U.S. allies and partners to provide immediate humanitarian relief for the Cuban people. Taken together, these measures will significantly reduce migration pressures.

The Cuban private sector is real, important, and growing, forming the cornerstone of a revitalized economy and civil society. It is critical to Cuba's economic recovery, and its success will empower non-state actors. As the state sector of the economy has stagnated, the private sector has become the largest provider of imported consumer goods, despite operating in an increasingly hostile business environment.<sup>14</sup> U.S. sanctions add another layer of obstacles for it to overcome. In early 2024, the Biden administration relaxed some sanctions to help the private sector, but more can be done.

President Trump should:

- Remove Cuba from the State Sponsors of Terrorism List, which inhibits both humanitarian and private sector international financial transactions and also has no basis in fact. In addition to aiding the private sector, delisting Cuba will remove a serious irritant in our relations with Latin America and Europe and will restore the credibility of the list itself.
- Authorize two-way correspondent banking. This will enable Cuban private businesses to take full advantage of the ability to open U.S. bank accounts and move funds through regular banking channels.
- Direct the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, or OFAC, to work with the financial industry to provide fast-track specific licenses or safe harbor letters to financial institutions willing to process authorized transactions with Cuba. Currently, the fear of unintentional sanctions violations and the costs of compliance have discouraged most financial institutions from handling even legal transactions.

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<sup>14</sup> Nora Gámez Torres, "New Restrictions on Wholesalers Spark Fears about Cuban Private Sector's Future," *Miami Herald*, Aug. 20, 2024, <https://www.miamiherald.com/article291215475.html>.

- Authorize a general license for U.S. investors to invest in Cuban private and cooperative businesses, including in agriculture, enhancing their ability to raise capital and build supply chains in the United States.
- Suspend Title III of the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act to increase security for U.S. investors and eliminate an issue of contention with Latin American and European allies.

As Cuba's economic crisis has deepened, food insecurity has become widespread, and the lack of resources has put public health at risk. To support the Cuban people and alleviate these acute aspects of the current crisis, the Trump administration should:

- Provide immediate humanitarian food and medical assistance through established humanitarian channels.
- Provide a fast-track review for specific licenses to export humanitarian assistance not covered by existing general licenses and license exceptions (e.g., medical supplies). Current licensing practices are causing serious delays in the work of religious and humanitarian groups.

## Competing with China and Russia

Realistically, Cuba is not going to break relations with Russia or China. Based on Cuba's history, its leaders fear dependency on any one country and have worked to diversify its economic relations ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. But the United States is a natural economic partner for Cuba, a potential source of trade, tourism, and investment far beyond what Russia or China can offer. Moreover, a robust economic relationship with the United States would give Cuba an incentive to limit its military and intelligence cooperation with U.S. adversaries. Some of the recommendations above lay the groundwork for deepening U.S.–Cuban commercial ties. In addition, the Trump administration should:

- Authorize specific licenses for U.S. investment in any Cuban enterprise that benefits the Cuban people. Current regulations already authorize trade that meets this criterion.
- Take advantage of U.S. social and cultural ties by restoring the general license for individual people-to-people educational travel and abolishing the State Department's Prohibited Accommodations and Restricted Entities and Subentities lists. These lists prevent U.S. visitors from staying in most Cuban hotels, thereby limiting the scope of people-to-people and cultural exchanges. An increase in U.S. visitors will also boost the Cuban private sector, which encompasses many businesses in hospitality.
- Restore full processing at the U.S. Embassy in Havana of Cuban nonimmigrant visa applications to facilitate educational and cultural exchanges.

## Enhancing cooperation on issues of mutual interest

Engagement facilitates cooperation and opens diplomatic channels to raise issues in the hope of finding some common ground. Making unilateral demands of Cuba on contentious issues like property claims or human rights has never produced results.

- Nominate an experienced diplomat as U.S. ambassador to Cuba. Although a number of well-qualified Foreign Service officers have served as chargés, an ambassadorial appointment will signal Washington's seriousness in embarking on a new policy.
- Propose restarting the Bilateral Commission to the Cuban government in order to oversee a resumption of the working groups on issues of mutual interest and issues in contention.
- Initiate a regular human rights dialogue with the Cuban government where we can raise issues and cases of concern.

- Establish a working group on property claims to develop a process for resolving outstanding claims in order to clear the way, both legally and politically, for greater commercial engagement.

## Engaging on human rights

The issue of human rights has been a perennial point of conflict between the United States and Cuba, complicating efforts to improve relations. Harassment and arrests of dissidents are frequently cited by opponents of engagement as a reason to maintain U.S. sanctions. Yet that policy, in place for more than 60 years, has not produced any human rights improvement. On the contrary, when bilateral relations have been tense, the Cuban government's siege mentality has led it to close political space and intensify the repression of dissidents. That dynamic has been clearly visible in the past few years, as the economic situation on the island has deteriorated.

Pursuing engagement does not imply condoning human rights violations by Cuba. The United States should continue to voice support for Cubans seeking to exercise their basic human rights and to condemn the Cuban government's actions when it violates those rights.

As part of a policy of engagement, the United States should press to reopen an ongoing human rights dialogue with Cuba. Engagement will offer new opportunities to coordinate human rights policy with our allies. The United States should continue to advocate for clemency for demonstrators who engaged in nonviolent protests and urge the Cuban government to abide by the international conventions on human rights that it is a party to.

While no U.S. policy can force the Cuban government to adhere to high standards of human rights, engagement offers better prospects for improvement than sanctions, because it creates incentives for Havana to be responsive to Washington's concerns.



Historically, when bilateral relations have warmed, the Cuban government has been willing to take positive steps on human rights.

But making Cuban concessions on human rights a precondition for improving relations has never worked, as the Biden administration discovered. That approach simply prevents the United States from changing policies that are damaging to U.S. national interests while producing no benefit for the Cuban people. The United States maintains normal relations with a wide range of countries that have poor human rights records, including both adversaries and allies, because those relationships serve U.S. national interests. The same is possible with Cuba.

## **A pragmatic policy based on U.S. national interests**

Policy toward Cuba, more than most foreign policy issues, has a significant domestic political dimension because of the Cuban American community in southern Florida. Yet there has always been a part of the community that favors engagement. When Presidents Carter and Obama took the initiative to improve relations, pro-engagement Cuban Americans rallied in support. When a president takes the lead, there is widespread support for engagement with Cuba from the business sector, the cultural and educational sectors, and the public at large.<sup>15</sup>

A policy of engagement needs to be grounded in realistic expectations. The road will not be smooth. There will be setbacks and moments where our differences with Cuba overshadow our common interests. Engagement will not erase the fundamental differences between the United States and Cuba. It is not an alternative path to regime change. The claim that engagement under Obama “failed” because it did not produce dramatic political changes in Cuba in just 24 months is disingenuous when put forward by people supporting a policy of sanctions and regime change that had produced no

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<sup>15</sup> William M. LeoGrande, “Cuba’s Role in U.S. Presidential Elections,” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, May 22, 2024, <https://quincyinst.org/research/cubas-role-in-u-s-presidential-elections>.

progress in the preceding 50 years (and has not produced any since). The promoters of regime change have consistently overestimated the likelihood of success and underestimated the associated costs.

Relaxing U.S. sanctions will not solve the Cuban economy's structural problems — only Cubans can do that — but in the near term it will contribute to economic recovery, eliminate some of the obstacles facing the Cuban private sector, raise the Cuban people's standard of living, and reduce migration pressure. Expanding economic and cultural linkages will draw Cuba closer to the United States, increasing U.S. influence relative to that of China and Russia.

In the long term, engagement can create opportunities and incentives that may result in an expansion of economic freedom and political liberalization in Cuba, but no U.S. policy can guarantee those outcomes. The Cuban people will decide Cuba's future, but if the United States hopes to have a positive influence, it has to engage.

The pace and extent of engagement ultimately depends on the Cuban government's interest in improving relations. But most of the initial steps recommended here are ones the United States can and should take unilaterally — even without a positive response from Havana — because they advance U.S. policy interests.

A fully normal relationship between the United States and Cuba will require the eventual dismantling of the matrix of legislative limitations on bilateral relations. But a bold and determined president can use executive authority now to reset policy and set U.S.–Cuban relations on a better path for the future.

## About the authors

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