



Let Trade Topple Cuba's Tyranny

Biden should denounce Cuba's communist tyranny while pushing for more free trade with Cubans.

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In Cuba this past July, thousands of openly defiant citizens took to the streets, chanting they were "no longer afraid" of the communist regime. In response, a routine, inevitable wave of repression ensued, but this time was different since the world saw much of it live on social media channels, which Cubans increasingly use. The myth of an egalitarian, socialist paradise with a superior healthcare system was clearly exposed with viral images of miserable hospital conditions and chronic food shortages.

More noteworthy still was the willingness of ordinary Cubans to persevere with the protests. Unlike the last massive protest in Havana, in 1994, which fizzled out as a one-time affair, this year's demonstrations will have a sequel. When dissidents announced they would march peacefully through Cuban cities on November 20, the regime refused to grant them permission to do so. Current dictator Miguel Díaz-Canel, heir to the Castro brothers at the helm of the Communist Party, has scheduled military exercises on the same date and declared a "day of national defense" against supposed foreign interference. The dissidents, led by playwright Yunió García, responded by changing the protest date to November 15.

This game of chicken is also being played outside Cuba. Last week, Florida Democrats in the House of Representatives, led by Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.), passed a House resolution that expresses solidarity with Cubans "demonstrating peacefully for fundamental freedoms." The 40 votes against largely came from Democrats in the party's progressive wing. In July, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.), who generally opposes free trade, blamed the protests in Cuba on the American embargo; that is, on a lack of free trade. Now, the question is what President Joe Biden will do about Cuba, an issue which divides his own party.

Former President Barack Obama renewed diplomatic ties with the Castro regime, removed the island from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, and eased some of the embargo's economic sanctions. This last measure aimed to "foster robust commercial ties," create stakeholders in the American business community, and produce "conditions in Cuba favoring greater economic

freedom," as American University professor William Leogrande wrote. The real changes Obama wrought were the political concessions, though, which legitimized the dictatorship, and the greatly increased flow to the island of U.S. tourists, who were allowed to travel to Cuba regularly on commercial airlines, cruise ships, and ferries. Remittances also increased considerably as limits were lifted.

In terms of trade, however, the impact was small. Leogrande writes that Obama left "the core of the economic embargo...intact," since only pharmaceutical and telecom companies could enter joint ventures with the Cuban state, while U.S. exports "were still limited to agricultural, medical, and some consumer goods."

The embargo, initially strict, has become a leaky structure. In 2000, the Trade Sanctions Reform and Enhancement Act permitted the sale of food and agricultural goods to Cuba. By 2020, the U.S. was the island's main provider of food and agricultural products and its ninth-largest trading partner, according to economist Daniel Lacalle. The 27 percent of Cuban GDP that consists of international trade—mainly with Canada, China, Venezuela, Spain, and the Netherlands—makes a mockery of the regime's continuous claims of a U.S. "blockade" against the island.

The limited scope of Obama's normalization policy toward Cuba was due to legal constraints. He was willing to lift the remaining parts of the embargo entirely, but according to the terms of the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992 and the Helms-Burton Act of 1996, this requires the approval of Congress, which Obama called for.

Things changed once Donald Trump won the 2016 election, but it was mostly a matter of tone. Although once a supporter of "opening with Cuba," Trump the candidate used tough rhetoric against the Castro regime and its Venezuelan satellite, reaping strong electoral results in south Florida. As president, Trump restricted travel and the flow of remittances to the island, placing a limit of \$1,000 per person each quarter. Nevertheless, he "left the basic architecture of Obama's opening to Cuba in place," Leogrande concludes, due primarily to sustained pressure from the farm, tourism, and telecommunications industries.

But during the final days of his presidency, Trump returned Cuba to the list of international sponsors of terrorism (alongside Syria, North Korea, and Iran.) At the time, an Associated Press article suggested that Trump's intent was to "hamstring" president-elect Biden. According to Emilio Morales, an exiled Cuban economist, Biden was unlikely to incur the political risk of throwing "a lifeline to Cuba's leadership without anything in return," as Obama had done.

In fact, Obama not only decided to forego any serious attempt to blunt the Cuban regime's apparatus of repression; he also made it considerably more difficult for ordinary Cubans to escape from communism. He ended the "wet foot, dry foot policy," which allowed Cuban refugees who reached U.S. soil to remain in the country and obtain green cards. He also got rid of the Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program, a George W. Bush-era policy that allowed the Cuban healthcare professionals who are sent abroad on forced labor assignments to defect to U.S. embassies and consulates. Between 2006 and 2016, the program allowed over 7,000 medical workers to escape Cuba's brutal "missions," which have become the regime's main cash cow, providing over \$6 billion in foreign currency in 2018. The abrupt change in policy left

180 Cuban doctors stranded in Colombia, where they sought refuge after fleeing the medical missions in neighboring Venezuela.

Obama's policy had regional repercussions. When Obama held a press conference in Havana alongside Raúl Castro in 2016, he emphasized that "Cuba is sovereign, and the future of Cuba will be decided by Cubans, not by anybody else." The problem was that the Castros—apart from forbidding Cubans to determine their own future—never practiced noninterventionism in Latin America; they exported guerrilla warfare and Soviet repression tactics, meddled in elections, and leached other countries' natural resources. Obama's Cuba deal, in fact, involved turning a blind eye to the regime's takeover of Venezuela. As Obama admitted in Havana, his conversations with Castro did not include "an extensive discussion of Venezuela," although they did "touch on the subject." This was like speaking to an ivory trader without mentioning elephants.

To his credit, Obama's easing of travel and commercial restrictions against Cuba were steps in the right direction. Why should the government determine where you can travel or with whom you can trade? But his obstruction of the few available escape routes for Cuban dissidents was a serious mistake, as was his symbolic whitewashing of the Cuban dictatorship, which he astoundingly praised for its "enormous achievement in education and healthcare." For Cuban political prisoners and those risking their lives for liberty in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and other subdued Latin American nations, few images were as discouraging as those of the leader of the free world frolicking with Castro at a baseball game.

And Trump's restrictions on trade, travel, and remittances to Cuba were mistaken; such curbs on liberty likely harm ordinary Cubans as much as the regime itself. Nevertheless, Trump was right to denounce the Cuban and Venezuelan dictatorships on the global stage, even if this was inconsistent with his support for dictators elsewhere. And Trump struck a balance by exerting diplomatic pressure on Havana and Caracas, while refraining from military adventures and attempts at regime change.

Whether or not a "state sponsors of terrorism" list serves a useful purpose, Cuba *is* a state sponsor of terrorism. To give just one example, the regime harbors the top brass of Colombia's National Liberation Army (ELN according to the Spanish acronym), a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group created in 1964 with Fidel Castro's support. In 2019, the ELN bombed a police academy in Bogota, Colombia, leaving 20 dead. Díaz-Canel then denied Colombia's extradition request for four of the ELN leaders who now enjoy the remaining charms of Havana. This is part of a long history of the Cuban regime's attempts to do to Colombia what it already did to Venezuela, which is why it's important for U.S. leaders to distinguish between friend and foe in an increasingly dangerous neighborhood.

Biden's Cuba policy, which is under review, can build on what his two most recent predecessors got right while avoiding the mistakes of each. The administration should undo Trump's commercial and travel restrictions and allow as much free trade as possible. The political reality, which the Democratic Party's top brass seems to recognize, is that congressional approval for the end of the embargo is even less feasible now than under Obama, whose Cuban adventures arguably contributed to Republican victories in Florida in 2016 and 2020. Biden also should avoid Obama's public embrace of the Cuban dictatorship, which shouldn't mean engaging in

hostilities. As the Cato Institute's Ian Vásquez tells *Reason*, "America's role in the world is to denounce tyranny while recognizing the limits of its own power."

The Biden administration should go beyond "wet foot, dry foot" and, as Vásquez suggested in 2017, "grant political asylum to all Cubans who escape the island." And though pushing for greater internet access in Cuba is helpful, wifi alone won't bring down the tyranny. After all, in Venezuela, the Castro-Maduro cadre erected a totalitarian state while the use of the web was still "partly free" (and with the lowest broadband speed in Latin America).

Wise politics, wrote philosopher Nicolás Gómez Dávila, consist of strengthening society and weakening the state. In that vein, Biden's approach should be simple: oppose, pressure, and denounce the Cuban dictatorship—but allow American commerce, tourism, and money transfers to benefit ordinary Cubans. The tailwinds are strong. For the first time in six decades, the Cuban regime is afraid of its people.