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Las Relaciones Estados Unidos-Cuba en un Nuevo Escenario Global

Panel 1: El gobierno de Joe Biden y la política hacia Cuba, perspectivas entre el 2022 y el 2024
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Remarks

I would like to thank Ambassador Cabañas and his team at CIPI for inviting me to this important *conversación*.

My topic is “Factors Influencing Biden Administration Policies.” I will focus on an important reason for the lack of serious steps to reverse the Trump administration policies that suspended and, in some aspects, reversed the process of normalization between our two countries. I’m referring to the lack of effective progressive voices in Washington, which has yielded the debate to opponents of normalization in and outside the U.S. government. This imbalance has led, for at least the first two years of the Biden Administration, to a situation in which we can no longer call them “Trump policies,” but rather “Trump/Biden policies.” The appointment of Senator Chris Dodd as Special Presidential Advisor for the Americas can change this dynamic, but the task ahead for him is difficult.

There are reliable anecdotes of strong American presidents telling constituencies with which they agree that their election into office was the *beginning* of the struggle, not the end. As he was preparing to enter the White House in 2009, Barack Obama often told the story of Franklin Delano Roosevelt meeting with activists – union members – who asked him for bold action on their issues. FDR listened carefully and said, “You’ve convinced me. I agree with what you’ve said. Now go out and make me do it.” He was calling on them to fight.

There are similar anecdotes of Lyndon Baines Johnson making the same call to battle to African-American leaders when he became President during the push for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and, after the 1964 election, the Voting Rights Act.

While some historians dispute details of the stories, it would be naive to say that leaders can “lead” on difficult issues without followers demanding that they lead. To go onto the political battleground without troops is foolish.

I’ve seen this on the Cuba issue over my years in the U.S. government. The Reagan Administration, whose Cuba policy has been characterized by Secretary of State Al Haig’s offer to the President to “turn that fucking island into a parking lot” and “go to the source” of Central America’s problems, had a national security advisor, Richard Allen, who encouraged the

formation of the Cuban-American National Foundation to demand creation of Radio Martí and many other initiatives. When I worked here in Havana (1989-91), we often saw the George H.W. Bush Administration urging, rather than calming, advocacy from Miami. When I worked for Bill Clinton and we needed to dig out from signing Helms-Burton and from the punitive steps taken after the “Brothers to the Rescue” debacle, we reached out to Cuban-Americans and told them they’d need to “make some noise” for restoration of remittances and direct flights, for people-to-people relations, for flexibility, for the national interest (vice crassly political interests) to be part of policy. Even with powerful, emboldened Cuban-American threats ringing in our ears, these new voices made our policies possible.

This pattern has held in subsequent administrations too. The George W. Bush Administration welcomed hard-right Cuban-American demands for reversals of some of the Clinton people-to-people policies. The Obama Administration – particularly after the ambush he faced at the Summit of the Americas in Cartagena in April 2012 – began moving analytically and politically toward the policy of normalization announced while many of us were in this very room in December 2014. Obama’s team smartly channeled demands for a process to gain the release of Alan Gross into something much greater – a series of steps, including release of the “Cuban Five,” that brought the two Presidents to launch normalization. An essential element of the strategy was channeling the support of progressive groups in Washington and in Miami – and that positive energy continued as normalization gained momentum.

In each case, smart administration officials turned to advocates and said, even if implicitly, “Make me do this.” Demands make things happen. If proponents of policy shifts are silent, things don’t happen.

Biden Staff Different

The Biden era has been different since before it began – for reasons relating to Biden’s style, his chosen staff, and changes among the previously “progressive” groups that have cared about U.S.-Cuba relations. From the early days, staff asserted that “times have changed,” necessitating efforts to distance Biden from the normalization policies that he had supported as Vice President. The most common reason cited was their disappointment with candidate Biden’s showing in Miami in 2020.

I worked for Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joe Biden for a short time, before he joined the Obama campaign, but I saw enough to feel that he is a leader with a commitment to policies based on the U.S. national interest who, when armed with good ideas and strategies, is prepared to pursue them. He helped in relations with China and in exploring solutions to the challenges on the Korean peninsula. He was cautious but, when staffed well both analytically and politically, stepped up and did well. That was the case when he was Vice President, when he fully supported normalization with Cuba as a historic necessity and in the U.S. national interest.

His presidential campaign statements on Cuba were at times ambiguous, but they clearly signaled an appreciation of the value of normalization. Surveying the harm to “the Cuban people” that President Trump’s measures caused, he promised to “go back” and fix them. It’s true that his language was measured; he didn’t promise a full rollback. But the code was clear

enough that progressives – shell-shocked by the Trump era – found comfort that the national interest would again be brought to bear on the Cuba issue.

After the election and before taking office, however, it became clear that management of the issue was going to be nothing like it was during previous administrations. Campaign staff did not reach out to organizations eager for Biden to restore normalization; they didn't even reach out for comprehensive situational and policy briefings from the non-governmental experts who'd been working the issue for decades. What little they said took the focus of the Cuba issue off national interests and, feeling pain from Biden's weak showing in Florida, cast politics among Cuban-Americans and members of Congress as immutable obstacles, not challenges requiring smart tactics. The bureaucracy, unwilling to face the wrath of select members of Congress, was fine with that.

There was no signal like in the past – no “make me do it” – but rather a pretty clear signal of don't bother me with the same soft-on-Cuba policies that the Obama/Biden Administration had championed in 2014-16. Biden's advisors appeared to want to “out-Trump Trump” to supposedly win Cuban-American hearts and minds in Florida.

This forced supporters of normalization into a dilemma – either they shut up, as the Biden staffers and State Department bureaucrats wanted, or they keep some pressure on. This tension emerged during discussions coordinated by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) and the Center for Democracy in the Americas – to prepare a paper for the incoming administration (after the election and before the inauguration). The resulting document, which is easy to find on the internet, reflects compromises reached at the table – but not a consensus. There were disagreements on major issues, such as what the new Administration should do challenge the Trump Administration's bogus allegations of Cuban involvement in or knowledge of the so-called “sonic attacks” against U.S. diplomats. There was disagreement on the urgency of reversing the United States unilateral abrogation of the Migration Accords. There was disagreement on the wisdom and impact of the Helms-Burton Section 109 “democracy promotion” or regime change programs.

Progressives were pulling back from even the easily defensible lines of the normalization period – positions that enjoyed the support of large sectors of even the Cuban-American community – during the Obama/Biden Administration. I obviously don't know everything that was going on behind the scenes; organizations that were quite transparent about their preferences, analysis, and strategies in the past became much less so. The pattern of nominal “progressives” giving up on a robust relaunch of a serious normalization process became quite clear early on.

Since Biden's inauguration, pro-normalization groups have pushed less and less hard for restoring the normalization process, focusing instead on narrow aspects of the policy. When the WOLA-CDA memo drew no response, not even a meeting to discuss its recommendations, no one complained. When Administration officials refused to embrace the science and intelligence assessments about the so-called “sonic attacks” – and fired task force managers who could not validate the allegations – the progressives were silent. When Administration officials claimed they were holding a “policy review” – without any sign of one existing – the progressives were silent. When the Administration did not act on Cuba's request for quick purchases of millions of syringes for COVID vaccines, they were silent. When the Administration rolled out its bare-

minimum adjustments to a few of the several hundred Trump-era measures without prompt development of implementing guidelines, the progressives' praise was so glowing that it reduced pressure on the Administration for more meaningful measures. (It took six months to produce a single legal channel for remittances.) Reactions were muted when the Administration continued prohibitions on U.S. persons' travel – barring them from staying in hotels and insisting that they commit to a “fulltime schedule of activities that ... support civil society in Cuba, or promote the Cuban people's independence from Cuban authorities, and will result in meaningful interactions with individuals in Cuba.” When officials pledged to increase harassment of European visa-waiver ESTA travelers to Cuba, the progressives were silent. When a White House official asserted that the U.S. sanctions against Russia were “by design” intended to have an impact on Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua – which John Bolton called the “Troika of Tyranny” – the progressives were silent. Time and again, people who consider themselves progressives on the Cuba issue failed to defend their positions.

What Would Help Progressives be Progressive?

I think there are several reasons for this phenomenon, and several things that can be done to press the Administration regain the initiative on Cuba normalization and better resist the temptation to sacrifice policy in the vain hope of stealing away the Republicans' base in Florida – to “out-Trump Trump.” One is to read the results of the mid-term elections clearly.

The decline of pro-normalization voices didn't happen overnight, and their resurrection isn't going to happen overnight either. But some things could reverse the trend.

One problem is the general lack of interest in all things Latin America in Washington, and the resulting **decline in funding** for analysis and policy discussions. I have heard – and if I'm wrong I welcome correction – that funders previously interested in Cuba thought during the late Obama years that the effort for a better U.S. policy had been won, and they moved resources elsewhere. That left organizations scrambling, forcing upon them compromises, with several embracing the easier task of monitoring human rights rather than monitoring and improving U.S. policy in addition to human rights.

I would argue that the downward spiral won't stop until progressives refine their goals – to promote normalization and the mutual benefit of both countries and peoples – and stick by them. Over time, funders are unlikely to have money for yet more human rights monitoring that merely supports 60-year-old policies.

While progressives' **focus on Hill strategies** is based on the wise observation that the lack of legislation in the Obama approach was a flaw, lobbying efforts – I speak as someone who spent seven years on the Hill – they wasted energy on the Hill without a broader vision and without a willingness to confront the Administration and bureaucracy – don't work. Special-interest strategies don't address what's needed for normalization. Agriculture in Republican states has been an engine for some aspects of normalization, but appeasing those legislators – to get them on a bill that's in their interests already – has at times gone too far. Even when such efforts have worked in the past, good legislative language has disappeared when hidden hands remove it in the dark of night, such as during conference.

The solution is to combine Hill strategies with efforts downtown and – while building on Members’ interest in narrow measures – to create a policy package that goes beyond special interests.

The **Helms-Burton Section 109 programs** have contaminated the pool of information. The hundreds of millions spent over the years on “democracy promotion” or regime change in Cuba have created many voices that, while independent of Cuban government influence, are not independent of U.S. and Miami influence. For years, covert action programs run by USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy and its clients, and the State Department have trained Cubans in political influence operations that, while perhaps coinciding with participants’ personal views, are aggressively disseminated by persons in the United States with a political agenda. The reports are interesting and often well packaged and promoted, while many experts find reading Cuban government media to be tedious. This has created an imbalance in the information stream. Having watched the regime-change programs since their inception in 1996, I am comfortable asserting that their influence operations have made it much harder for analysts – even ones striving to be objective – to sort truth from exaggeration or fabrication.

A solution is for progressives to demand greater transparency, greater consultation, and greater accountability of the programs – and to question information regardless of source. Unlike traditional covert actions, these are mysteriously allowed to conduct influence operations into the United States. Progressives should also challenge U.S.-based media reporters to be more transparent about the sources of their information, rather than taking them as unbiased advocates of truth.

Compounding the problem, the **youthful arrogance** of Washington staffers may be worse because COVID made face-to-face outreach, during which honest views are more easily expressed, more difficult – or at least easier to avoid. Some staff think that a couple of internet searches are just as good as sitting down with an expert or predecessor. I wonder how many have read the wise lessons of former U.S. practitioners, like the brilliant oral history by USINT Principal Officer Jay Taylor, or the riveting “hidden history of negotiations” featured in “Back Channel to Cuba.” I don’t say this just because I’m a cranky old man who’s no longer on the playing field. I say it because our successors need training.

One solution is for everyone involved in the Cuba issue, especially progressives, to press for broader dissemination of validated, analyzed information – beyond that subsidized by the U.S. government – to progressives and persons in policy-relevant positions.

Internal to the U.S. Government is the perennial problem that our **bureaucrats are not institutionally protected** from political pressure. Neither are they discouraged from allowing it to influence them. A desk officer or office director at the State Department gets no protection from the bullying of members of Congress and their staff, and faces no penalty if they cut deals with them. I saw this close up during my years at the State Department and National Security Council and as a staffer in the House and Senate. Certain congressional offices keep book on bureaucrats downtown – to identify who’s “good” and who’s “bad” – and harm the reputations and careers of some. Progressives often excuse the bureaucrats’ “careerism” as a necessary survival tactic, which results in, essentially, yielding the playing field to the hardliners.

A solution is, again, for pro-normalization advocates to demand greater transparency and stronger insistence in having equal access to the policymaking process. Progressives' silence is implicit approval.

What Can Cuba Do?

In past remarks from this dais I have offered some ideas about how Cuba might help change dynamics in Washington. I say this assuming that there's no chance that the Cuban National Assembly will authorize \$25 million a year in Section 109-style funding to train and nurture "independent" journalists and activists in the United States.

But precedent shows that there are ways that Cuba can better inform the narrative that U.S. journalists, bureaucrats, and even some academics have embraced. Indeed, the Technical Report by Cuban scientists on the so-called "sonic attacks" last year, and the panel that Ambassador Cabañas brought to the Cuban Embassy in Washington before that, made it harder for the myth to prevail in Washington discussions. The Hill continued to politicize the issue; legislators named a law providing funds to people reporting symptoms after this city – even after the U.S. intelligence community and numerous panels concluded Cuba had no role, no knowledge. But the allegations have all but dried up, and the State Department is quietly restaffing the Embassy here.

I have worked on Latin America and understand the tendency – not just in Cuba – to not want to *rendir cuentas* to the international community. But, to be honest, it's hard for someone to influence the narrative if they don't get out with a strong alternative narrative. There is a lot about Cuba that U.S. people don't know or don't understand – and ignorance and lack of understanding only empower agenda-driven interpretations to dominate. U.S. people know about the extreme shortages here, but they do not understand their own role in them. Those who know about President Díaz-Canel's recent travels to China and Moscow do not understand the political and economic context. They know about the protests on 11 July 2021, but they don't have context on them – nor on the subsequent judicial proceedings.

I am not asserting that more effective Cuban communications would "win the information war" for Havana, but I am certain that it would make it harder for interested parties to dominate the narrative ... the analysis ... the policies ... and the politics of the issue. Faster, more complete information through social media as well as traditional media can go a long way to forcing the sort of debate our bilateral relationship requires.

What will happen?

In closing, I'd like to return to the main premise of my remarks: Without more dynamic interest – more pressure and more noise – from people who consider themselves progressives, who consider themselves supporters of normalization, and who believe that normalization is in the interests of the United States, Cuba policy in the second half of the Biden presidency is likely to advance at a snail's pace if at all.

But ... and it's an important "but" ... the appointment of former Senator Chris Dodd to sit above the bureaucrats who protect their careers and the political appointees who prefer to base policy on Florida politics ... offers the intriguing possibility, if not probability, that roles are about to

change. As a three-term Member of the House and five-term Member of the Senate, Dodd knows the importance of mobilization to get things done – and he could very well be the Administration official who tells progressives that it’s time to start “making a little noise” ... to start demanding new policies (or even a return to Obama policies). I worked closely with him for several years (but not since 2010) and – unless his DNA has been reprogrammed – trust that he will press for better information, better debate. He faces many obstacles in the bureaucracy and Congress, as I’ve outlined, but he can make at least incremental progress. If the progressives want to restore the normalization processes, they now have a leader to support.

If he’s the same Chris Dodd I worked for in 2009-10, he’ll grow impatient with the bureaucrats and partisan Hill staffers and try to change the narrative in Washington back to one more reflective of our national interests. But the self-identified progressives have to do their part.

Thank you.