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Cuba in the Foreign Policy of the United States of America:  
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Cuba, the United States and a Changing Western Hemisphere

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I want to begin by thanking Ambassador José Cabañas and the Organizing Committee for arranging this round of talks and inviting me, and Vice Minister Carlos Fernández de Cossío for his continuing support of this annual meeting.

This presentation asks a simple question pertinent to the main subject of this panel: To what extent can we expect Western Hemisphere countries to influence U.S. policy toward Cuba? The question arises from the history of the successful Cuban-U.S. negotiations between 2013 and 2017 which led to the resumption of diplomatic relations, 22 memoranda of understanding, and benefits that both countries enjoyed as a result of the rapprochement. Several factors contributed to the successes in those years. Yet, unquestionably, pressure from Latin American countries significantly influenced President Barack Obama’s decision to break with prior US policy and engage Cuba constructively. Might that be possible again?

### **A Changed Context**

First we must recognize how different the context today is from 2013. While several factors contributed to ending the Cuban-U.S. rapprochement between 2017 and 2021 – most importantly, the inauguration of President Donald Trump – three changes in the Western Hemisphere alone might have been sufficient to alter the course of improved relations: the reduced influence of *ALBA*; the region’s turn to the right; and the declining U.S. interest in Latin America.

*ALBA* was launched in 2004 by Cuba and Venezuela, and it produced considerable benefits to many people in the Western Hemisphere, as well as good will and some influence for both countries. While only eleven countries in the Western Hemisphere were members of *ALBA* at its height, its projects extended to many other nations. For example, under *Operación Milagro* Cuban doctors and nurses provided eyesight to three million people from Uruguay, Jamaica, Argentina, Mexico, Suriname, and El Salvador in addition to those in member states of Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua.

But *ALBA*’s success depended on Venezuela’s financial support, which it derived from the sale of oil. In 2016 Venezuela’s oil production declined by 60%. Consider that Venezuela’s oil exports to Latin America totaled \$2.38 billion in 2013 and only \$154 million in 2019. By 2019, Ecuador and Bolivia had withdrawn their memberships in *ALBA*, and *ALBA*’s influence in the region – and by extension, Cuba’s influence – declined.

The second factor was the region’s turn to the right. Elections in Brazil, Bolivia,

Argentina, Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador during this period effectively ended the so-called “pink tide” and muted the significant opposition that previous governments had voiced about a hostile U.S. policy against Cuba. Colombian President Ivan Duque not only expressed no appreciation for Cuba’s role in ending Colombia’s 50-year conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); he opposed the peace agreement and attempted to undermine its implementation. Arch-conservative governments in Brazil, Ecuador, and Bolivia ended programs involving Cuban medical personnel, which resulted in Cuba losing more than \$500 million. The region’s turn to the right naturally undermined Cuba’s famed “soft power.” This is evident from the change in Latin American public opinion about Cuba between 2015 and 2020. Surveys done by Latino Barometer showed that favorable attitudes toward Cuba declined in nine of the seventeen countries surveyed, while favorable attitudes toward Cuba increased in only four countries.

Even if Latin America had not turned to the right, and Cuba’s soft power influence had not diminished, Latin America’s voice mattered less to the United States after 2017. President Trump had so little regard for the region that he did not attend the 2018 Summit of the Americas. Better relations with countries in the hemisphere mattered little to the Trump team, apart from stopping migration from Central America and Mexico, and negotiating a revised NAFTA accord. For the ideologues in the administration such as John Bolton, great power ideology shaped policy more than U.S. interests did.

While some of these factors have changed since 2021, some still have a residual effect. So let us turn to the current context.

### **The Western Hemispheric Context at the end of 2022**

Some notable changes in the region seemed to offer auspicious conditions for a renewed effort to improve Cuban-U.S. relations. Elections in Chile, Colombia and Brazil in 2022 brought progressives to power, and this followed the removal in 2021 of right-wing government in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru.

In mid-2021, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador signaled a renewed Mexican interest in pressuring the United States to reduce or abolish sanctions against Cuba. In belittling President Joe Biden’s claim that the United States “stands with the Cuban people,” the Mexican leader said, “The truth is that if one wanted to help Cuba, the first thing that should be done is to suspend the blockade of Cuba as the majority of countries in the world are asking.” One might have imagined that his outspoken remarks would have resonated in the White House, because President Biden was seeking Mexico’s approval for a return to the Trump administration’s odious “Remain in Mexico” program.

Similarly, remarks by Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley of Barbados in December 2021 might have caught the attention of Vice President Kamala Harris, who had warmly welcomed her to Washington two months earlier. Prime Minister Mottley asserted that “Cuba’s opening of its tertiary education facilities to Caribbean youths, and its highly recognized eye-care program

*Operacion Milagro*...have been of immense value for decades,” adding that “its outreach to Barbados and so many other CARICOM neighbors, with nurses and doctors to join the battle against COVID-19, trumps all others.”

Most of the countries in the Western Hemisphere also registered their opposition to U.S. policy by refusing to endorse the Biden administration’s denunciation of Cuban government arrests in response to demonstrations on July 11. Another administration might have perceived these events as “pressure” from the Western Hemisphere to change Cuba policy. But the Biden administration was steadfast until recently in maintaining the Trump administration’s policy.

One indicator of the Biden administration’s willingness to ignore pressure from Latin America and the Caribbean was its lack of attention to the 2022 Summit of the Americas, which it prepared haphazardly. For example, it waited until mid-August 2021 to issue a Request for Proposals from U.S. cities for the opportunity to host the meeting. The Summit produced almost nothing meaningful. Mexico sent only its foreign minister, and several Caribbean countries decided to participate only at the last minute, in response to the U.S. refusal to invite Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel. If President Biden cared about the region, such an embarrassment would have led to the departure of the Senior National Security Advisor for the Western Hemisphere, as was the case when President Obama was blindsided at the 2012 Summit with demands for Cuba’s participation.

It thus seems evident that “pressure” from the region is not a factor in shaping U.S. policy toward Cuba. But that does mean the regional context is unimportant. An alternate way of understanding the region as a factor in U.S. decision-making is to consider the regional context as a source of creating “space” for change rather than as a source of “pressure.” This new space enables the Biden administration to focus more clearly on U.S. interests rather than ideology or domestic politics.

### **Space for Change**

Four elements constitute a new context for Cuban-U.S. relations at the end of 2022.

First, migration from the Northern Triangle countries of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador), which did draw President Biden’s attention in 2021, is now made up of migrants predominantly from Cuba and Venezuela, not Central America. This new wave led the Biden administration to resume migration talks with Cuba that President Trump had discontinued. In addition, it may have led the Biden administration to push the Venezuelan opposition to resume talks in Mexico with the Venezuelan government.

Second, elections in Colombia and Brazil resulted in new presidents who perceive that good relations with Cuba is in their countries’ national interests. Consider that Cuba’s ambassador to Colombia was the first emissary with whom President Gustavo Petro met. Cuba is serving as an interlocutor in the Colombian government’s negotiations with the National Liberation Army (ELN), just as it did in negotiations with the FARC. In the case of Brazil, it appears that President-elect Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva hopes to restore a leadership role for the

country in the Western Hemisphere, especially through institutions such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), of which Cuba is a member. US sanctions against Cuba, especially the U.S. placement of Cuba on the List of State Sponsors of Terrorism, serves as an impediment to the cohesive hemispheric relations Lula seeks. In addition, Cuban doctors previously had provided medical care in underserved regions of Brazil where Brazilian doctors are reluctant to work. It is likely that Lula will request the return of some Cuban doctors, though not as many as had served in Brazil until 2018.

Third, President Biden's appointment in November 2022 of former Senator Christopher Dodd as Special Presidential Advisor for the Americas means that a person with a long history of friendship with President Biden, and someone whom the President trusts, might be able to increase awareness in the White House of how US interests could be advanced by changing US policy. Dodd knows the region well, and he is hearing the ways in which improved US relations with Cuba would serve US national interests. Consider a November 2022 letter from eighteen former South American and Caribbean leaders that called on the United States to end its sanctions against Cuba.

The fourth element is China. I do not believe that China's investments in and trade with Latin America is a serious threat to U.S. national security. But it has almost become conventional wisdom in Washington that China does pose such a threat. In part, this is because President Biden sees the world from a Cold War, bipolar framework. (British historian G.M. Young remarked in 1943 that to understand the character of a public person, one needs to look at what was happening in the world when the person was twenty years old.) The President tends to conflate Russian and Chinese positions as a singular threat to the United States. The perceived Chinese threat thus increases the region's importance and makes paying attention to Latin Americans more important.

### **Concluding Observations**

In short, recently changed circumstances in the Western Hemisphere have made U.S.-Latin American relations more important for the United States. In turn, this makes Cuba once again a foreign policy issue, and takes Cuban-U.S. relations out of the grasp of domestic electoral politics. In effect, the changed regional circumstances create a space in which Cuban-U.S. relations can be allowed to follow a course guided rationally by Cuban and U.S. national interests. As the 2015-2017 rapprochement demonstrated, such a course would likely lead to a better relationship from which both countries could benefit. The current circumstances differ from the situation in 2012, when the U.S. administration did perceive Latin American demands as pressure. Instead, the notion of "space" provides a more accurate appreciation for the way Cuban-U.S. relations may be influenced by the Western Hemisphere.