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Panel 1: Diez años del restablecimiento de relaciones diplomáticas entre Cuba y EE.UU.
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Why was it so easy for Trump and Biden to reverse the U.S.-Cuba normalization?

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Remarks

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

I was in the Teatro “Dr. C. Pelegrín Torras de la Luz” at ISRI when many of us in this room watched our Presidents announce their historic agreement. As humans, we felt relief, joy, and hope. As analysts, we saw that the drivers we’d been tracking for so long had finally aligned to produce a new scenario. We dared to express hope, even though – between shots of *añejo* that ISRI Director Allende graciously provided during lunch – we knew there were obstacles and skeptics on both sides and there was a lot of work to do.

In Washington, bureaucrats who stayed away from the Cuba issue or actually opposed normalization for many years, fearful that it would hurt their careers, joined the celebration. But my notes from December 2014 and early 2015 remind me that most of us who knew what we called the “anti-Cuba industry” in the United States knew that the enthusiasm within the U.S. Government for the Presidents’ historic decision was fragile from the beginning. The “industry” was not just a couple Members of Congress; it was the network of well-funded programs, contractors, and bureaucrats devoted to overthrowing the Cuban government, or at least purging it of its revolutionary essence, and keeping bilateral relations off balance to achieve that goal. The announcement of normalization set the industry on its back foot, but we knew that it would not let the President’s policy stand without a fight.

Normalization was a very successful policy in that it demonstrably served the interests of both countries, but it was not entirely surprising how easily and thoroughly President Trump was able to stop it, nor how easy it was for President Biden to continue and even deepen Trump's policies for his four years in office. The Trump-Biden administrations have been unable to identify the national interests served by their shared policy – indeed, they have flouted some goals such as controlled migration – and, as we saw on 5 November, it did not remotely serve the Biden/Harris Administration's vaunted ambition of closing its gap with the Republicans in the Florida vote. It was a silly thought based on a badly flawed analysis of the 2020 election results.

When I was invited to this conference, I proposed we study why it was so easy for Trump and Biden to halt and largely reverse normalization. My idea was that the good analysis would identify how future U.S. administrations could, if they wanted, put it back on track. I don't think the team that we now see re-entering on duty on 20 January is going to want to, but compiling the "lessons learned" is nonetheless worthwhile.

Speaking from the Washington perspective at least ... the warning signs about the fragility of the agreement, even among individuals claiming to support normalization, were evident early on. It's easy to note that normalization was easily reversed because it was built on executive orders rather than legislation, but that begs the question why. Let's explore the reasons.

- One, inside the Administration, debate flared over how *new* Obama wanted his *new* Cuba policy to be. Was he rejecting 60 years of failed efforts of forcing "regime change" in Cuba – and becoming open to peaceful coexistence and evolutionary change based on both countries' interests – or was he merely seeking the same regime-change goal through kinder, gentler means. The part of the debate that I was privy to revolved around the phrase "the Cuban people" – and whether it included people in and supportive of the Cuban Government, or whether it included only what some in Washington called "agents of change." Secretary of State John Kerry, at the ceremony reopening the U.S. Embassy here in Havana in August 2015, said "The future is for Cubans to shape." President Obama's statements during his visit the following March spoke more directly to the agents of change. That leads me to the second dynamic. .
- The people who receive millions of dollars to support the "agents of change," including one fellow who worked in Obama's NSC Staff after normalization started, pushed their interpretation and, as you can see, the industry's view prevailed. The departments and agencies that had administered tens of millions in annual "democracy promotion" cash, backed by their Senate and House allies, have always prioritized engagement with "opposition" elements while leaving the embargo and most structural limitations on national engagement in place. These agencies had spent hundreds of millions of dollars in regime-change political programs that, unlike covert actions carried out by the Intelligence Community, are executed outside the Presidential and Congressional reporting requirements imposed by the National Security Act – which means their impact and even their consistency with policy are not subject to serious oversight. Also distinct from intelligence operations, these are permitted to influence U.S.-based audiences, think tanks, and ultimately political deliberations. Washington is awash in information about Cuba that itself has directed. The firewall between covert operations and policy is gone, and opponents of normalization have held sway. Similarly, the Department of Homeland

Security's provocative "doctor defector" program – to encourage Cuban doctors abroad to defect – continued apace.

- Three, the Obama Administration and State Department failed to establish realistic criteria for assessing the success of normalization. They allowed detractors to create wild expectations that no serious observer of either country's policies would say were achievable in the bilateral relationship, further yielding the field to critics. As a result, when Cuba had not become a multi-party Jeffersonian democracy with a free-enterprise economy two years later, opponents proclaimed the policy a failure. The 16 bilateral accords reached by our two governments on a broad array of issues didn't matter. Indicators of the expansion of Cuba's private sector, greater people-to-people contact, and deepening cooperation in areas of concern to the United States didn't matter. The State Department did not defend its own accomplishments and let critics call the policy a failure.
- Four, the bureaucrats also failed to counter (and indeed nurtured) bizarre, unfounded allegations that Cuba was involved in, or at least witting to, the so-called sonic attacks on U.S. personnel in Havana. This created pretexts for the Trump Administration to effectively close the embassies in both capitals, suspend normalization, and abrogate the migration accords. The bureaucrats failed to counter fake news about certain street protests – complex events that, indeed, involved thousands of spontaneous Cuban participants but also had the fingerprints of Washington's regime-change partners all over them. (On-island activists do not have access to the thousands of bots that mobilized protestors and international opinion at lightning speed like that.) And, more recently, the bureaucrats have failed to counter fake news about Chinese military and SIGINT "bases." I can't speak for these bureaucrats, but – having been one for 30 years – I think I can reasonably assert that their reason for not helping correct the record on these factual matters has nothing to do with the quality of the information. There was advantage in letting it stand. There is also advantage in asserting, falsely, that anyone arrested in any situation in which the U.S. government has an investment or other interest is a "political prisoner," including looters, arsonists, and people overturning police cars.
- One last factor was perhaps the most innocent. Most advocates of normalization forgot, somewhat understandably, the smaller but more reliable engine of political support for better bilateral relations – which is people-to-people contact. After the disastrous missteps that led to the signing of the Helms-Burton law in 1996, Bill Clinton's decision to allow the people of the United States and the people of Cuba to deal directly with each other proved that – when their governments get out of the way – the people on both sides are pragmatic, forward-looking good neighbors. The term "people-to-people" has been stolen from the people and applied to either regime-change programs or tightly limited programs of activities that "support civil society ... and promote the Cuban people's independence from Cuban authorities" and deliberately steer clear of officials or Communist Party members on lists created by U.S. bureaucrats. If a future administration wants to return to policies that serve the U.S. national interest, they can ask *our people* how to move forward in the relationship.

Compounding the setbacks is the sad fact – as I lamented at a previous CIPI conference – that most U.S. supporters of normalization were too timid to defend the policy, and, even when President Biden took office, pressed only mildly and occasionally for sunshine and accountability. Biden staffers duped them into thinking he would fulfill his campaign pledge to “in large part go back [to Obama policies].” Our “progressives” have been missing in action, pulling their punches in hopes that – bizarrely – politicians and bureaucrats will do difficult things without encouragement and pressure. Some who say they support normalization remain enthralled with the “sonic attack” conspiracy theories that almost shut down relations for four years. Some who made names for themselves exposing CIA covert actions in Latin America have, through inaction, given their passive approval to the covert actions carried out by the State Department, USAID, National Endowment for Democracy, and others under the Helms-Burton law. Other “fake news” drivers of policy, such as the nonexistent criteria for Trump and Biden to put Cuba on their list of “state sponsors of terrorism” and use it to hinder Cuba’s efforts to revive EU tourism, have prevailed. If false narratives are not challenged, they win.

Many Washington observers have pushed the line over the years that whenever the United States extends its hand in friendship, Cuba – fearing better relations – has to reject it, and unleashes mass migration, jams radios, and shoots down aircraft. Hillary Clinton said in 2010 that, if Cuba accepted better relations, it would “lose all [its] excuses” for its problems. Then-National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcón replied that Cuba welcomed the challenge. He said Washington could bring it on with the stroke of a pen.

The Washington mindset that Cuba was afraid to accept the challenge actually helped me at the White House in the late 1990s. The State Department agreed to some of our proposals, such as the Baltimore Orioles baseball exchange with Cuba, because they were convinced Cuba would reject the idea. The same logic prevailed when we pressed for licenses for the Catholic Church to send hurricane assistance, and on many other occasions. The logic was: Cuba is too scared to engage with us.

In fact, it’s people on our side who have cooked up crises to keep Administrations from putting the national interest ahead of Miami-based political agendas. We could build a pretty good chronology of examples. Even though President Clinton was years away from proposing normalization – if ever – groups like Brothers to the Rescue escalated tensions, leading to disastrous miscalculations, that led to signing of the Helms-Burton law. More recently, the July 2021 protests, just six months after Biden took office, revived triumphalist thinking in Washington and became an excuse amid timorous staffers to not explore a return to normalization. Cuba’s arrest of protesters is still cited as an insurmountable obstacle to better relations.

Here’s a key analytical lesson based on an examination of Presidents Obama and Castro’s historic decision of 10 years ago today: Although normalization proved that better relations were in the U.S. national interest, it was – as Cuban skeptics claimed – Washington that couldn’t accept the challenge.