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Beyond Embargo: Realigning US-Cuba Relations for a Multipolar World

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A decade after the Obama Administration embarked on a historic rapprochement with Cuba, relations between Washington and Havana have returned to an impasse. The trade embargo implemented in 1962 is still constricting Cuba's economy more than sixty years later. The Trump Administration derailed the Obama Administration's path to economic normalization by re-instating travel restrictions, expanding unilateral sanctions, and re-designating Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism (SST). The Biden Administration has adhered to Trump's approach, which exacerbates a humanitarian crisis and hinders private sector development without advancing human rights or democratization.

The embargo has long been ineffective at achieving U.S. objectives and it is actively counterproductive to American interests in an international order shifting towards multipolarity. By ignoring the international community's near-unanimous opposition to the embargo, Washington disregards an ascendant and assertive Global South (broadly consisting of Latin America, Asia, and Africa). Washington's refusal to engage with Havana leaves Cuba economically dependent on nations willing to violate U.S. sanctions for trade and investment, providing rivals with a strategically located client state.

Washington's approach toward Cuba must evolve beyond Cold War enmity to address the contemporary interests of both nations through dialogue and engagement. The lucrative benefits of normalized trade with the United States would drastically reduce Cuba's reliance on adversarial states and incentivize Havana to maintain positive relations with Washington. By prioritizing mutual interests over accumulated grievances, the United States and Cuba can resume engagement and end 63 years of economic estrangement.

Standing With the Cuban People

On November 2, 2023, 187 states in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voted to condemn the embargo against Cuba for the 31st consecutive year, while the United States and Israel opposed the resolution.¹ In a statement justifying the vote, U.S. Senior Advisor for Western Hemisphere Affairs Paul Folmsbee described economic sanctions as a tool to advance democracy and human rights, proclaiming his nation's "resolute" support for the Cuban people. Folmsbee rejected accusations of collective punishment, classified as a war crime under Article 33 of the Geneva Conventions, by citing humanitarian exemptions to the embargo.²

Publicly, Washington claims that sanctions are a means of pressuring recalcitrant regimes into compliance with U.S. demands, generally concerning democracy and human rights. However, policymakers also enact sanctions to deliberately deteriorate civilian living standards in hopes of inciting regime change. The trade embargo was explicitly designed for the latter purpose, as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Lester Mallory explained in a 1960 memorandum.

Concerned with Cuban President Fidel Castro's domestic popularity, Mallory wrote, "The only foreseeable means of alienating internal support is through disenchantment and disaffection based on economic dissatisfaction and hardship." He proposed that "every possible means should be undertaken promptly to weaken the economic life of Cuba" to "decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation, and overthrow of the government."³ President Eisenhower suggested blockading Cuba, stating, "If they (the Cuban people) are hungry, they will throw Castro out."⁴ The Kennedy Administration expanded the Eisenhower Administration's 1960 ban on U.S. exports to Cuba into a total trade embargo the following year.⁵

The embargo was one aspect of Washington's Cuba strategy, as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) trained Cuban exiles for the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion and devised a variety of operations to assassinate Fidel and Raúl Castro.⁶ Havana accepted the Soviet Union's installation of nuclear ICBMs in anticipation of a second U.S. assault, sparking the Cuban Missile Crisis upon their discovery by U-2 Spy Planes. Among other conditions, President Kennedy pledged not to invade Cuba in exchange for the Soviet withdrawal of nuclear missiles.⁷ After pulling back from the brink of Armageddon, Washington curtailed its grandiose plans for regime change in Cuba, but the trade embargo remained.

Moscow recognized the geostrategic advantages of having a client state 90 miles from American shores and provided generous subsidies that mitigated the embargo's impact. Eastern Bloc nations accounted for 85% of Cuba's trade in 1989, leaving the island unprepared for the USSR's dissolution two years later.⁸

The ignominious end of Soviet socialism renewed hopes in Washington and Miami that Castro's days were numbered as Cuba spiraled into a steep

depression called the Special Period. Washington tightened the screws with the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act, intended by its sponsor, Congressman Robert Torricelli, to "wreak havoc on that island." The law bans ships that docked in Havana from U.S. ports for 180 days, prohibits trade through American-owned foreign subsidiaries, and denies debt relief to nations that provided economic aid to Cuba.⁹

From 1990 to 1995, Cuban GDP fell by approximately 35%, construction by 74%, agricultural production by 47%, manufacturing capacity by 90%, and average caloric intake by 30%.¹⁰ When Havana prioritized its formerly negligible tourism sector, it became a prime target for Cuban-American exile groups, who dropped anti-Castro leaflets over the capital and bombed tourist hotels in the 1990s. Cuba sent spies to infiltrate the organizations and shot down two exile-piloted planes entering the island's airspace in 1996, provoking Washington to sign the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, better known as Helms-Burton, into law.

Helms-Burton authorizes extraterritorial sanctions against foreign companies investing or trading with Cuba and mandates U.S. opposition to Havana accessing international financial institutions. Additionally, the act codified previous sanctions into law, preventing the president from lifting the embargo via executive decree. The expanded embargo became an economic blockade extending beyond U.S. borders to encompass the global dollar-based market.¹¹

Humanitarian Exemptions

Washington maintains that humanitarian exemptions spare the Cuban people from the embargo's effects, claiming the embargo only targets the regime. This claim does not withstand scrutiny. William LeoGrande, a senior fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), determined that "the economic embargo has failed to achieve any of its stated policy goals while exacting a high human cost, stifling the development of the Cuban economy and making daily life harder for Cuban families."¹²

In 2021, a report by Oxfam concluded that "the rights of Cuba's most vulnerable—women, children, older adults, diverse populations, and people with disabilities—have experienced the brunt of the harm over the last 60 years."¹³ A report by the UN Secretary-General reached the same conclusion, stating that "the embargo has continued to have a severe impact on

the production, trade, and welfare of Cuba, impeding its development” and inflicting “significant negative effects on the standard of living of Cuban citizens.”¹⁴ In 2018, a UN study reported that the embargo and additional measures had cost Cuba \$130 billion in lost revenue.¹⁵ The failure of humanitarian exemptions to safeguard civilians is evident, but why are they ineffective?

UN Special Rapporteur Alena Douhan found that financial institutions regularly negate humanitarian exemptions by overcomplying with sanctions.¹⁶ To avoid the stiff penalties incurred by violating sanctions, U.S. and foreign banks practice excessive risk avoidance, frequently blocking all transactions with targeted countries, even those explicitly exempted. Overcompliance also drives financial entities to freeze non-targeted assets and impose arduous certification processes that deter authorized transactions with expensive fees and extended delays.

Douhan determined that de-risking “prevents, delays or makes more costly the purchase and shipment to sanctioned countries of goods, including humanitarian goods and services such as essential food, medicine, medical equipment and spare parts for such equipment, even when the need is urgent and of a life-saving nature.”¹⁷ Risks and restrictions render humanitarian exemptions ineffective at counteracting the combined impact of the embargo, unilateral sanctions, and SST listing on the Cuban people.

Who Sanctions Hurt

The preponderance of evidence indicates that civilians are the foremost victims of broad-based economic sanctions. Washington typically denies culpability for this outcome, although former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo credited sanctions with making conditions “much worse for the Iranian people” and affirmed his conviction that they “will lead the Iranian people to rise up and change the behavior of the regime.”¹⁸ As with nearly every other case of economic warfare, Iranian civilians suffered while the Iranian state remained intact and defiant.

The Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) discovered “a remarkable level of consensus across studies that sanctions have strongly negative and often long-lasting effects on the living conditions of the majority of people in target countries.” Using Venezuela as a case study, CEPR found that Washington’s policies devastated the nation’s already

flagging economy by targeting its oil sector, which accounted for 93% of total exports. The Trump Administration imposed primary sanctions to block the state-owned oil company from accessing U.S. markets and secondary sanctions to cut it off from the international economy.¹⁹

Washington enforced secondary sanctions on two Mexican companies that had signed oil-for-food deals with Caracas, forcing them to divest from the starving nation. By preventing Venezuela from importing essential goods, exporting oil, or restructuring its debt with international financial institutions, the maximum pressure campaign drove hyperinflation and a collapse in per capita income. CEPR concluded that U.S. sanctions left 41,000 Venezuelans dead and prevented 300,000 from receiving medical care from 2017 to 2018.²⁰

The Trump Administration followed the same playbook with Cuba as it did Venezuela and Iran, using economic sanctions to punish civilians. LeoGrande concluded that the Trump policy’s “explicit” objective was “making Cubans miserable enough to overthrow the government.”²¹

The embargo, sanctions, SST designation, pandemic, and state mismanagement caused severe shortages of food, medicine, electricity, and other goods. Economic deprivation stoked anger over one-party rule, which erupted into protests in 2021. Cuban security forces swiftly repressed the demonstrations and imprisoned hundreds of participants.²²

Immigration

The economic disparity and close proximity between Cuba and the United States have long compelled migration, which rose to new heights over the past three years as the island plunged into fiscal ruin.

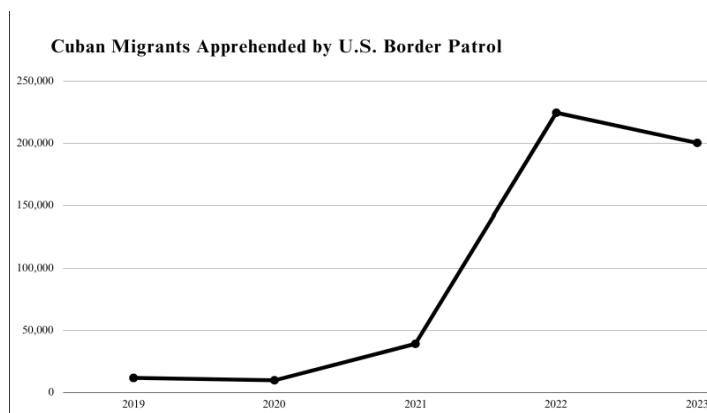
Until 1995, Washington encouraged migration by allowing Cubans who entered U.S. waters to stay and gain residency. Faced with tens of thousands leaving the island on makeshift rafts, the Clinton Administration introduced the “wet foot, dry foot policy,” which allowed Cubans who reached American shores to remain in the country. The Obama Administration terminated the policy in 2017.²³

Despite no longer receiving preferential treatment, Cuban migration has drastically increased since 2020. In 2021, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) encountered 39,303 Cuban migrants in 2021, a

figure which soared to 224,604 in 2022 and 200,287 in 2023.²⁴ LeoGrande identified the economic blockade as “contributing directly to the rise in Cuban migration.”²⁵ Cubans are part of a broader surge in hemispheric migration, with the CBP detaining over 2.3 million people from Latin America at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2022.²⁶

Almost 4% of Cuba’s total population has departed in the last two years, with no sign of the exodus abating and no political appetite in Washington to accept them.²⁷ The most effective way to curb this wave of immigration is for the United States to permit the Cuban economy to recover by ceasing policies designed to destroy it.

Figure 1



Data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection²⁸

Supporting The Private Sector

Beginning with the legalization of private employment in 1993 and accelerating after Fidel Castro’s retirement and the Obama thaw, Cuba’s small business sector now comprises one-third of the island’s workforce.²⁹ The Biden Administration welcomed the growth of entrepreneurship and eased restrictions to allow Americans to provide limited loans to Cuban small business owners in 2023.³⁰ The efficacy of the Administration’s measures remains to be seen, given the tendency of financial institutions to overcomply with U.S. sanctions by barring all transactions with targeted states.

Aiding independent Cuban businesses is widely popular in Washington. According to the State Department, “the private sector is Cuba’s best hope for generating economic development and employment to increase the standards of living for the Cuban people and reduce the current high levels of migration.”³¹ Despite the Biden Administration’s recognition of the

private sector’s importance, the main impediment to its further expansion is the economic blockade.

Hope and Change

Fostering private sector growth was a core objective of the Obama Administration’s détente with Cuba. The United States began aiding the nascent enterprises in 2015 by legalizing imports of privately produced goods and lifting remittance restrictions to allow Cuban Americans to send funds to their families.³²

Entrepreneurs faced a severe obstacle in Cuba’s SST status, a designation only shared by Iran, Syria, and North Korea, which drastically restricts access to international trade and banking due to overcompliance.³³ The Reagan Administration listed Cuba as an SST in 1982, although the proscription’s legitimacy was disputed even during the Cold War. LeoGrande argues it was a “politically motivated attempt by [Reagan] to drum up support for his unpopular policies in Central America.”³⁴

From 1987 onwards, the State Department conceded that Havana was not sponsoring acts of international terrorism but maintained the listing due to Cuba “harboring past terrorists.” This justification raises issues, as Washington granted haven to Luis Posada Carriles, who orchestrated hotel bombings in Cuba and masterminded the 1976 bombing of a Cubana Airlines flight that killed all 73 passengers and crew. President Obama ordered a review of the designation and, upon finding no evidence of Havana’s involvement in terrorism, removed Cuba in 2015.³⁵

Negotiations between Washington and Havana made headway in 2015 by re-establishing diplomatic ties and implementing six regulatory amendments to the sanctions regime. The Helms-Burton Act prevented President Obama from lifting the embargo outright through executive order, so his Administration reduced restrictions on commercial travel, trade, and commerce. Washington prioritized the introduction of technological services, which allowed U.S. companies to export telecommunications equipment and negotiate the expansion of Internet access on the island.³⁶

Obama’s reforms accelerated the growth of Cuba’s private sector. In 2015, 161,000 Americans traveled to Cuba, a 77% increase from the previous year.³⁷ Commercial cruise ships and airliners began charting courses to Cuba in 2016, taking 284,937 U.S. citizens to the island.³⁸ During the first visit to Cuba by a sitting U.S. president since 1928, President

Obama spoke to an assembly of entrepreneurs in Havana, underscoring the possibilities created by U.S. investment and travel. Telling the gathering that “America wants to be your partner,” Obama opined, “More Americans coming to Cuba means more customers for your businesses. There will be more channels for you to import supplies and equipment.” He concluded, “One of the best ways to help the Cuban people succeed and improve their lives would be for the U.S. Congress to lift the embargo once and for all.”³⁹ Small business owners heralded what they believed was the dawn of a new era but proved to be the high-water mark of modern U.S.-Cuba relations.

Returning to Isolation Hurt the Cuban Private Sector

The Trump Administration wasted little time dismantling the achievements of its predecessor, with profound ramifications for Cuba’s private sector. The re-imposition of travel, commerce, and remittance restrictions ended the flood of American travelers and the influx of foreign capital that had fueled the hopes of hundreds of thousands of entrepreneurs.⁴⁰

Washington emptied the recently reopened U.S. embassy of non-essential staff amid allegations of acoustic attacks directed against American and Canadian diplomats, dubbed Havana Syndrome. President Trump blamed the Cuban government for the incidents and expelled 15 diplomats, although a later assessment by U.S. intelligence agencies found no evidence that the symptoms were more than psychosomatic.⁴¹ Nevertheless, Havana entered the crosshairs of National Security Advisor John Bolton, who recalled the second President Bush’s infamous “Axis of Evil” speech by labeling Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua the “Troika of Tyranny” and calling for regime change.⁴²

In 2019, the Trump Administration lifted the suspension of Title III of the Helms-Burton Act, which the previous three presidents had waived. This unprecedented action allows U.S. citizens who claim that their property in Cuba was expropriated to sue foreign companies using that property for “trafficking.” While the Department of Justice’s Foreign Claims Settlement Commission has certified 6,000 claims valued at \$8 billion with interest, the Act also allows uncertified claimants to bring Title III actions, of which there are up to 200,000 claims valued in the tens of billions. This measure’s function is to deter foreign investment in Cuba with the threat

of legal consequences.⁴³

Figure 2



Data from the World Bank.⁴⁴ Chart from Data Commons⁴⁵

Trump’s policies negatively impacted Cuba’s private sector. In a 2019 survey of 126 private businesses, 80% of respondents stated that U.S. sanctions hurt their livelihoods.⁴⁶ The onset of COVID-19 made an already dire situation exponentially worse, depriving entrepreneurs of all tourism revenue. At the same time, chronic shortages and inflation paralyzed the nation to an extent not seen since the Special Period. In a survey of private food producers, 94.3% of businesses reported being negatively impacted by the pandemic, with 83% decreasing production and 13% stopping production altogether.⁴⁷

President Trump’s final blow came in the last weeks of his presidency when Secretary Pompeo re-designated Cuba as an SST. According to WOLA, “banks, financial institutions, and international vendors have stopped facilitating both regular trade and cooperation with faith groups seeking to provide humanitarian and development support to Cuba.” Private businesses face additional restrictions when attempting to open foreign bank accounts, use U.S.-based e-commerce technology, or access digital banking services. These barriers “stifle the few avenues available for Cubans to expand private sector growth and development,” and hinder exempted monetary transactions with the United States⁴⁸ Entrepreneurs celebrated President Biden’s election, hoping for a return to rapprochement, but Washington’s inaction extinguished their optimism. Despite Biden’s campaign promise to return to engagement, many of the Trump Administration’s sanctions and the SST designation are still in effect.⁴⁹

The Biden Administration’s refusal to engage with Cuba has raised the ire of top officials in the Obama Administration. Former Deputy National Security

Advisor Ben Rhodes, who played a leading role in negotiations with Havana, said, “Disappointed doesn’t begin to scratch the surface of how I feel about the Biden-Cuba policy.” He condemned Biden’s approach as “doubling down” on the Trump Administration’s reversal of the Obama thaw, asking, “Why would any Cuban official ever, ever negotiate anything with America ever again after this?” Rhodes charged the Biden Administration with “legitimizing” Trump’s destruction of detente and “gaslighting” Cuba.⁵⁰

Two hundred and fifty private business owners expressed their disappointment in an open letter to President Biden in late 2021. Urging the president to “resume the path of engagement and normalization,” they said, “It is cruel that in the middle of a global crisis, your administration is choosing to continue failed policies that directly target our livelihoods and intentionally make our lives more difficult.” The letter finished with a plea to “work with the U.S. Congress to lift the embargo and to take action immediately to increase travel, trade and investment” and rescind the terrorism designation.⁵¹ Although lifting remittance caps and loosening travel restrictions are positive steps, the most effective way for the Biden Administration to aid Cuba’s private sector is to resume the path toward economic normalization.

Figure 3

Chronology of the Cuban Embargo



Information from *Cuba and the U.S. Empire: A chronological history*.⁵²

Views from the South

A tectonic shift is underway in the international order, as the unipolar era defined by American primacy transitions into a multipolar world without a predominant nation. This incremental realignment came to the forefront with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as Washington proved unable to unite a global coalition behind its diplomatic and economic campaign to isolate Moscow.⁵³

The United States still exerts more power than any other nation. However, China, Russia, and Global South nations dissatisfied with their marginalization in the U.S.-centric order are challenging its hegemonic status. The expansion of BRICS, a geopolitical bloc of emerging economies comprising 42% of the planet's population and nearly a third of its GDP, indicates the Global South's interest in reshaping the international order.⁵⁴ With global governance no longer the uncontested domain of Washington, the Global South is more relevant to U.S. interests than ever.

Aude Darnal, leader of The Global South in the World Order Project at the Stimson Center think tank, contends that "the United States tends to treat its partners in the Global South as pawns in great-power politics and exerts pressure to follow U.S. leadership." Darnal cautions that this binary approach is obsolete and risks "losing potential opportunities for diplomacy, cooperation, and coalition-building" by dismissing the Global South's desire to be "treated like equal partners." without being forced to align with one power over another.⁵⁵

The embargo makes the United States an outlier among the international community, as UN member states have demanded the embargo's end in annual votes for more than 30 years. While Cold War antagonism contributes to this discrepancy, it does not explain Cuba's near-universal backing from the Global South.

Despite its location, natural resources, and population size relegating it to a minor power, Cuba has enjoyed outsized prestige in the Global South due to Havana's contributions to national liberation movements and its expansive medical program. The 120-state Non-Aligned Movement elected Cuba as its chair in 1979, when the organization wielded significant influence, and again in 2006.⁵⁶ Cuba was elected to the UN Human Rights Council in 2023 for the sixth time with 146 votes, receiving more support than any other state

in Latin America.⁵⁷

A History of Support for Global South Revolutionaries

Washington perceived Cuba as a Soviet proxy during the Cold War, for good reason. Havana acted as a client of the Kremlin on numerous occasions, including the Missile Crisis and Cuba's defense of Ethiopia during Somalia's invasion in 1977.⁵⁸ However, Havana also pursued autonomous foreign policy objectives centered around the national liberation struggles waged across the Global South during the Cold War.

According to Wayne Smith, former Chief of Mission of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, "Cuba had little to gain economically or strategically by promoting revolution. Ideologically, however, Cuba has always taken the principle of international solidarity very seriously - no doubt because the survival of the Cuban revolution itself has been so dependent upon international assistance."⁵⁹ Havana aligned with anti-colonial rebels across the Global South during the Cold War, providing varying degrees of military and medical support to at least 12 such insurgencies in Africa and the Middle East.^{60, 61, 62, 63}

When the Portuguese Empire collapsed in 1975, apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia feared the leftist People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) would turn the newly independent Angola into a haven for anti-colonial revolutionaries. At the reported urging of U.S. Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, the South African Defense Forces (SADF) invaded Angola through their Namibian colony to install a compliant militia in Luanda.⁶⁴ Without consulting Moscow, Havana responded to the MPLA's appeals for aid by airlifting 30,000 Cuban forces to Angola, which routed the SADF back into Namibia.⁶⁵

Former South African President Nelson Mandela emphasized the material and symbolic impact Cuba's actions had on the continent, stating that their victory "broke the myth of the invincibility of the white oppressors."⁶⁶ Washington was less enthused, with an apoplectic Kissinger warning President Ford that "Namibia is next on their list, and then there will be South Africa," before suggesting that the United States bomb Havana to "crack the Cubans" if they marched on Rhodesia.⁶⁷

Over the next 16 years, 500,000 Cubans deployed to

Angola with belated Soviet support, where they fought the SADF and trained guerilla cadres from Rhodesia, Namibia, and South Africa.⁶⁸ Trilateral negotiations brokered by Washington in 1990 concluded with Cuba departing from Angola in exchange for South Africa ending its occupation of Namibia.⁶⁹ Mandela lauded “the Cuban internationalists [that] have made a contribution to African independence, freedom, and justice, unparalleled for its principled and selfless character.”⁷⁰ Cuba’s role in the anti-apartheid struggle is reflected in the solidarity shown by African nations over three decades later.⁷¹

Havana’s support for revolutionary movements in Latin America proved largely unsuccessful, albeit not for lack of effort. Cuba aided insurgents fighting dictatorships in the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Panama, Haiti, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia.⁷² Cuba ended military aid to the few rebel groups still active after the Cold War to embrace the center-left to socialist leaders elected during the “Pink Tide” of the 2000s in Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Ecuador.⁷³

Heeding the Hemisphere

Cuba’s revolutionary credentials made it a credible guarantor in negotiations between the Colombian government and several leftist insurgencies. In 2016, Havana mediated a peace accord between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government that ended the FARC’s 50-year conflict.⁷⁴ Cuba also served as a guarantor in talks between Colombia and the National Liberation Army (ELN) hosted in Havana, which broke down after rebels violated a ceasefire in 2019. Bogotá reinstated arrest warrants for the ELN negotiators in Cuba and demanded their extradition.⁷⁵ Norway, a co-guarantor, opposed the repatriation because it violated an agreed-upon diplomatic protocol guaranteeing safe passage for the rebels if negotiations fell through. Havana declined the request, which the Trump Administration cited to re-proscribe Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism.⁷⁶

Upon taking office in 2022, Colombian President Gustavo Petro restarted negotiations and eventually signed a ceasefire agreement with ELN representatives in Havana alongside Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel in 2023. Despite Petro’s strident denunciations of the designation as “an act of profound diplomatic injustice” and his repeated appeals to U.S. Secretary

of State Antony Blinken and President Biden, Washington remains obstinate.⁷⁷ In December 2023, a State Department official revealed to Congress that the Administration had not yet started the mandatory 6-month review of Cuba’s SST status that would enable removal.⁷⁸

While the opposition of every Latin American nation demonstrates the embargo’s diplomatic drawbacks, Washington routinely neglects the hemisphere’s sentiment. In June 2022, the Biden Administration overruled the objections of nearly every invited government by excluding Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua from the ninth Summit of the Americas. The presidents of Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Bolivia boycotted the event while attending leaders disparaged Biden’s decision.⁷⁹

Although denunciations of Washington are hardly rare in Latin America, they are notable in contrast to the region’s response when the United States restored diplomatic ties with Cuba. A 2014 *New York Times* article headlined, “Cuba Thaw Lets Rest of Latin America Warm to Washington,” compiled the universal acclaim that Obama’s rapprochement earned from America’s most ardent detractors and allies alike.

Hailing the move as a diplomatic masterstroke, the authors noted that opposition to the embargo “united governments across the region, regardless of their ideologies,” as “even some of Washington’s close allies in the Americas have rallied to Cuba’s side.” Explaining the unanimous praise, then-Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Roberta S. Jacobson, acknowledged, “Our previous Cuba policy was clearly an irritant and a drag on our policy in the region.”⁸⁰ A return to this policy presents similar obstacles to diplomacy with America’s neighbors today.

Doctor Diplomacy

Cuba’s international medical program has sent 400,000 medical personnel to 164 countries since 1963, with an emphasis on developing countries. Cuba founded the Latin American School of Medicine in 1999, which has trained more than 30,000 doctors from 105 countries in a six-year medical program, free of charge. The deployment of more medical personnel to nations in Africa and Latin America than the G-8 countries combined in the same period generated immense goodwill for Cuba in the Global South.⁸¹

During the pandemic, Cuba’s robust biomedical sector

developed five vaccines and boosters, which tested at 90% effectiveness.⁸² With 86% of its population fully vaccinated, Havana offered vaccines and technology transfers to the developing world in 2022. Delays in securing approval from the World Health Organization and sanctions overcompliance limited the range of vaccine exports. Still, Cuba has shipped millions of doses to Mexico, Vietnam, Venezuela, Syria, Nicaragua, Belarus, and Iran.⁸³ This effort, like the deployment of medical personnel to developing nations, may well inspire goodwill from the Global South.

Double-standards and De-dollarization

Global South leaders have grown skeptical of the “rules-based international order” that Washington invokes and ignores at will. According to Darnal, Washington’s “obsession with leading the global order” is being met with resistance in the Global South due in part to “Western states’ poor track record when it comes to upholding international rules, whether it is through their various invasions abroad or their political accommodation of autocrats” to further their interests.⁸⁴

The latest evidence of this disconnect can be seen in the international response to the Israel-Hamas war, as Washington has vetoed a UN Security Council ceasefire resolution and opposed a UNGA ceasefire resolution supported by 153 countries and UN Secretary-General António Guterres.⁸⁵

Washington’s self-professed commitment to human rights rings hollow given its recent history of tortures in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and waging destabilizing wars in the Middle East responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths.⁸⁶ The Biden Administration’s efforts to enlist the Global South in a Manichean “struggle between democracy and autocracy” fall flat as it supplies billions of dollars in unconditional military aid to Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt.⁸⁷

Perhaps most concerning to the Global South is Washington’s unilateral weaponization of the global currency reserve. Christopher Sabatini, the senior research fellow for Latin America at Chatham House, determined that “the countries subject to some form of U.S. sanctions collectively account for a little more than one-fifth of global GDP.” Concern over America’s willingness to isolate countries from the international market has generated interest in alternatives to dollar hegemony.⁸⁸

The BRICS bloc of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa has taken the lead in advocating dollar divestment despite the United States only sanctioning Moscow and Beijing. In 2024, BRICS will expand to include Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates as U.S. partners seek to reduce their reliance on a currency that can be wielded against them. Sabatini concludes, “It’s time for Washington to recognize that its love of sanctions may be undermining its own economic and diplomatic power worldwide.”⁸⁹

Even as America’s unipolar moment recedes into the past, Washington persists with unilateral, counterproductive policies that alienate the Global South to its detriment. The Cuban embargo provides a zero-cost opportunity for the United States to begin reducing its use of counterproductive economic sanctions and enhance its standing with the Global South.

US Policy is a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Instead of attempting to reshape foreign countries with economic coercion, Washington should deal with the world as it is. By narrowing foreign policy aims to the pursuit of national interests, the embargo’s benefits and liabilities become clear. The blockade prevents economic engagement with the United States and nations that do not want to violate Washington’s extraterritorial sanctions. Cuba is left dependent on powers willing to defy U.S. sanctions, namely Russia and China. As the focus of U.S. grand strategy returns to great power competition, Washington should consider the liabilities inherent in its Cuba policy.⁹⁰

In 2023, U.S. reports claimed that China was in talks to establish a spy base in Cuba.⁹¹ Iran pledged heightened cooperation during a presidential visit to Havana, and Russia increased economic trade with the island to levels not seen since the Cold War.^{92, 93} By isolating Cuba from the dollar economy, Washington has left Havana reliant on U.S. adversaries willing to defy its sanctions. The most effective way for Washington to lessen this security risk is to diminish the financial influence that adversarial powers hold over Havana by lifting the embargo and gaining leverage in the process.

The fiscal benefits of free trade, unrestricted tourism,

and foreign investment from the dollar-based global economy are the most effective deterrents against Havana collaborating with adversarial military and intelligence services against the United States. The unparalleled advantages of normalized relations are a substantial incentive for Havana to avoid taking actions that could jeopardize its economic lifeline. Ending the embargo would decrease Cuba's reliance on U.S. rivals, bolstering American security interests instead of undermining them. The Biden Administration's refusal to engage with Havana risks consigning Cuba to repeat the role of a hostile satellite state.

Conclusion

The deadlocked status of U.S.-Cuba relations does not benefit either government or population.

Washington and Havana will not resolve their longstanding disputes with indefinite isolation.

Unilateral dictates demanding prisoner releases and democratization as prerequisites to negotiations only empower hardliners and reduce the likelihood of serious talks. The economic blockade against Cuba collectively punishes its civilian population, deprives its private sector, harms relations with the Global South, and aids U.S. rivals. The Cuban government has sustained 63 years of U.S. pressure; continuing a stagnant policy of economic constriction is unlikely to yield regime change.

The Obama Administration recognized these realities, and its pragmatic engagement with Havana did more to support the Cuban people and improve the United States' reputation in Latin America than any presidency before or since. Washington can support the Cuban people, empower entrepreneurs, build credibility with the Global South, and bolster U.S. national security by rescinding the SST designation, lifting the embargo, and normalizing economic relations with Cuba.

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