

## Not a Top Priority: Why Joe Biden Embraced Donald Trump's Cuba Policy

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Abstract: After promising during the 2020 campaign to re-engage with Cuba and roll back many of President Donald Trump's sanctions, President Joe Biden took no action during his first six months in office. Cuba policy was still under review when the July 11 protests forced the administration to respond. Under domestic political pressure from Republicans, Cuban Americans in south Florida, and Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ), chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, Biden reverted to the confrontational rhetoric typical of U.S. policy during the past six decades and imposed new, albeit largely symbolic, sanctions. As Biden's first year in office came to a close, the prospects for resurrecting President Barack Obama's normalization policy appeared dim.

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Throughout 2020, Joe Biden's presidential campaign tried to say as little as possible about Cuba, convinced that anything Biden said would lose Cuban American votes in south Florida without gaining any elsewhere. But he could not evade the issue entirely. Campaigning in Miami, he criticized Trump's Cuba policy because it had "inflicted harm on the Cuban people and done nothing to advance democracy and human rights." He promised that he would resume Obama's policy of engagement "in large part," lift Trump's sanctions that hurt Cuban families, restore Americans ability to travel to Cuba, and re-engage the Cuban government diplomatically. When Trump closed the main channel for wiring remittances to the island in the closing weeks of the campaign, the Biden camp called it a "cruel distraction" that was "denying Cuban Americans the right to help their families."<sup>1</sup>

Despite these promises, during Biden's first six months in office he did nothing, leaving all of Trump's punishing economic sanctions in place. When asked about Cuba, administration officials simply repeated campaign talking points. "First, support for democracy and human rights will be at the core of our efforts through empowering the Cuban people to determine their own futures," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in March 2021. "Second, Americans, especially Cuban Americans, are the best ambassadors for freedoms and prosperity in Cuba." The policy was under review, she added, but it was "not among President Biden's top priorities."<sup>2</sup> The campaign's strategy of avoiding Cuba had apparently crept into the new administration.

Early signals suggested that Biden was in no hurry to return to Obama's policy. In May 2021, the administration reaffirmed, with no real evidence, Trump's determination that Cuba was not supporting U.S. counterterrorism efforts. The following month, the United States voted in United Nations General Assembly against the annual resolution calling on the United States to lift the

embargo. The vote was 184-2, with Israel casting the other negative vote. In 2016, the United States abstained on the resolution, which the UNGA has adopted every year since 1992.

Juan Gonzalez, appointed Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs on the National Security Council staff, repeatedly voiced skepticism about engagement. “The idea that ... a president has to just go back to the way things were with Cuba does not understand our current context,” he said.”<sup>3</sup> Gonzalez also framed engagement as a soft power strategy for regime change: “Engagement is not a gift to a repressive regime. It is a subversive act to advance the cause of human rights and empower the Cuban people as protagonists of their own future.”<sup>4</sup> That framing was certain to poison the prospects for better relations by giving hardliners in Havana ammunition for their “Trojan Horse” argument, first articulated during the Obama administration, that engagement is simply a strategy for regime change by other means.

### **A Cuba Policy or a Miami Policy?**

Biden’s early reluctance to articulate a Cuba policy reflected the administration’s conundrum about how to manage the domestic political risks of keeping Biden’s campaign promise to re-engage. Biden, and Democrats generally, took a beating among Cuban American voters in south Florida in the 2020 election. Trump won more than 60 percent of the Cuban American vote in Miami-Dade—the most since George W. Bush in 2000. Democrats also lost two House seats in south Florida that they thought were safe.<sup>5</sup> This electoral rout made Democrats hyper-sensitive about the domestic political cost of doing anything about Cuba, even though Republicans appealed to Cuban Americans by branding Democrats as socialists more for their domestic rather than their foreign policies. In the 2022 mid-term elections, Democrats hope to win back the two House seats they lost and mount significant challenges to Sen. Marco Rubio and Governor Ron DeSantis.

In Washington, Biden had to contend with Sen. Robert Menendez, the new chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a bitter foe of the Cuban regime. At a February 2021 event sponsored by the Inspire America Foundation, an NGO that supported Trump’s regime change policy toward Cuba, Menendez joined a pantheon of conservative Florida Republicans, including Senator Marco Rubio, Senator Rick Scott, and Representative Mario Díaz-Balart, all of whom denounced Obama’s policy of engagement.<sup>6</sup> The White House bent over backwards to assure Menendez’s cooperation on Biden’s foreign policy agenda by consulting him regularly on Cuba, while pro-engagement legislators found it hard to get an audience at the White House.<sup>7</sup>

On the other side of the issue, a variety of constituencies urged Biden to resume Obama’s policy. The U.S. Agricultural Coalition for Cuba (USACC), including most of the major farm associations in the United States, sent Biden a letter asking him to lift the embargo to encourage agricultural trade.<sup>8</sup> During the campaign, over 100 progressive organizations called for Biden to work with Congress to repeal the embargo.<sup>9</sup> In February 2021, 56 progressive church and foreign policy groups wrote to Biden urging him to resume normalization.<sup>10</sup> The moderate Cuban American NGO, the Cuba Study Group, released a policy paper calling for renewed engagement and the reversal of Trump’s main sanctions.<sup>11</sup> However, none of these groups could deliver any sizeable bloc of voters in south Florida-- or anywhere else-- and none could counter Menendez’s power to obstruct Biden’s foreign policy agenda in the Senate.

## **July 11: Cuba Moves Up on the President's Agenda**

The July 11 protests put Cuba in the headlines and forced the issue to the top of the president's agenda. As videos went viral of Cubans chanting anti-government slogans and fighting with police, avoidance was no longer an option. On July 12, Biden made a brief statement in support of the protestors' "[clarion call for freedom](#)," and urged the Cuban government to "hear their people and serve their needs at this vital moment rather than enriching themselves."<sup>12</sup>

Republicans demanded that the White House to do more than just make statements. Senator Rubio denounced Biden for not doing enough to help the demonstrators. Conservative Cuban Americans blocked traffic in Miami and demonstrated in front of the White House demanding U.S. military intervention. Some in Florida tried to organize a flotilla of small boats to sail to Cuba in support of the demonstrators—risking a deadly confrontation with Cuban Border Guards. Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, blamed the unrest in Cuba at least in part on the humanitarian crisis there, and urged Biden to relax sanctions to ease the suffering of Cuban families.

In a statement on July 22, Biden tried to placate both sides. He announced new sanctions, all of which had been demanded by Sen. Rubio in a letter to Biden 10 days earlier.<sup>13</sup> The president ordered individual sanctions—known as Global Magnitsky sanctions—against the Cuban minister of the armed forces and a special forces unit of the Ministry of the Interior that deployed as riot police on July 11. Three more rounds of individual sanctions followed over the next few weeks targeting senior officials of the Interior Ministry and armed forces, the national police, and the military police.

Magnitsky sanctions, named for Russian attorney Sergei Magnitsky who died in state custody, target human rights abusers and corrupt actors globally by freezing their assets in the United States and banning their entry. The Cuban sanctions were largely symbolic since none of the people targeted have assets in the United States (if they did, the embargo would freeze them) and none were likely to be applying for visas.

Biden also promised to increase support for Cuban dissidents and explore ways to provide Cubans with Internet service independent of the Cuban government because it had suspended certain social media apps on July 11 to halt the viral spread of the protests. Ideas floated by Republicans ranged from satellites, to a powerful WiFi hot spot at the U.S. Embassy or Guantánamo Naval Station, to balloons in the stratosphere (reminiscent of the blimp known as "Fat Albert" that once broadcast Radio Martí to Cuba while floating over the Florida Strait).<sup>14</sup>

To mollify pro-engagement Democrats, Biden announced that he was creating a Remittances Working Group to find a way to get remittances to Cuban families with the least possible amount going to the Cuban government. He also affirmed that the State Department was working on how to safely re-staff the U.S. embassy in Havana, which has been operating with a skeleton crew since 2017 because of the mysterious injuries to U.S. personnel that came to be known as the "Havana Syndrome." Restaffing would allow reopening the consular section for Cubans seeking immigrant visas—a move essential to reducing the risk of another migration crisis. By closing consular services, the Trump administration left most Cubans no safe, legal way to emigrate.

Immigrant visas issued to Cubans fell 90% during the Trump years. In the first half of 2021, as the Cuban economic deteriorated, the U.S. Coast Guard saw a significant jump in the number of Cubans trying to cross the Florida Straits on small boats and homemade rafts.

Since July 11, Biden has given the Cuban diaspora a privileged role crafting his policy, calling Cuban Americans “a vital partner” and “the best experts on the issue.”<sup>15</sup> After a number of prior consultations with Cuban Americans by White House officials, on July 19, at the suggestion of Sen. Menendez, Biden met with nine prominent members of the community and promised to “make sure that their voices are included and uplifted at every step of the way.” Just as President Trump out-sourced his Cuba policy to Sen. Rubio, Biden appears to have out-sourced his to Sen. Menendez and the Cuban American diaspora. Not since the China Lobby dictated U.S. policy in East Asia has an exile community exercised such control over U.S. foreign policy.

The Biden administration decision to base its Cuba policy on domestic politics was especially galling to Cuban officials, who thought that practice had ended when President Obama decided to normalize relations. Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez decried Biden’s White House meeting with Cuban Americans as a “farse to justify regime change.”<sup>16</sup>

### **The View from Havana**

In the streets of Havana, Cubans honked their horns and applauded when Biden’s election was confirmed, anticipating that he would lift Trump’s sanctions.<sup>17</sup> President Miguel Díaz-Canel reiterated Cuba’s willingness to re-engage with Washington, tweeting, “We believe in the possibility of constructive bilateral relations respecting one another’s differences.”<sup>18</sup> In January 2021, Carlos Fernández de Cossio, director general of the U.S. division of the Cuban Foreign Ministry, expressed guarded optimism that the Biden administration would move fairly quickly to reverse Trump’s sanctions.<sup>19</sup>

But as Biden’s policy review dragged on, optimism turned to frustration and anger. The Biden Administration initially said that, as part of its overall policy review, it would reassess Trump’s last minute designation of Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism. But in May 2021, it re-affirmed Trump’s designation of Cuba as non-cooperating with U.S. counter-terrorism efforts. The Cuban Foreign Ministry angrily rejected the designation as “unfounded and mendacious... irresponsible and shameful,” noting that it was the United States, not Cuba, that had abandoned the counter-terrorism cooperation talks begun by President Obama.<sup>20</sup>

In early July, the State Department reaffirmed another Trump-era designation of Cuba as not making sufficient efforts to curb human trafficking. The dubious claim rested mainly on Cuba’s export of medical services in which Cuban medical personnel serve abroad, despite the fact that President Obama had lauded Cuba’s program of medical internationalism in 2009.<sup>21</sup> Cuba responded angrily to State’s designation, calling the accusation a “lie,” replying that the United States was “itself is among the countries with the worst problems of person trafficking.”<sup>22</sup> Thus bilateral relations were already seriously strained when the protests of July 11 erupted.

The Cuban government’s instinctive reaction to the protests was to blame the United States—both for the embargo’s role in deepening the economic crisis caused by COVID and on U.S.

support for regime opponents through “democracy promotion” programs. In his televised speech to the nation on the afternoon of July 11, Díaz-Canel condemned Washington “policy of viciousness” and blamed “a core group of manipulators” for organizing the protests in several cities.<sup>23</sup>

Although Díaz-Canel later admitted that the protestors included Cubans who had real, legitimate grievances that the government had failed to adequately address, the Cuban media focused on the use of the Internet and social media by the U.S. government and Miami exiles to foment a “soft coup”—that is, a mass popular uprising to overthrow the government. As evidence, they could point to a flood of disinformation on July 11 as protestors used social media to mobilize others across the island. Dozens of photographs and videos from other countries were falsely identified as depicting events in Cuba, all revolving around two themes: scenes of massive street demonstrations to convince people to join what was portrayed as a “people’s power” style revolution; and scenes of brutal repression and atrocities aimed at generating moral outrage against the regime.<sup>24</sup>

### **Looking Ahead: *Plus ça Change, Plus C'est La Même Chose***

As Biden’s first year in office draws to a close, the state of U.S.-Cuban relations is reminiscent of both the Clinton and Obama administrations. President Clinton ignored Cuba for his first year and half in office, despite warnings from the State Department and Intelligence Community that economic desperation on the island could precipitate a crisis. He only focused on Cuba when the 1994 “rafters” migration crisis forced it to the top of his agenda—much as the July 11 protests put Cuba on Biden’s.

Early promises of better relations at the start of President Obama’s first term were derailed by the arrest of USAID subcontractor Alan Gross. The protests of July 11, like Gross’ arrest, silenced both Cuban American and Congressional advocates of engagement, who feared being cast as apologists for repression. The protests emboldened the proponents of hostility and regime change, reviving pipe dreams of imminent regime collapse. The result of Alan Gross’ arrest was policy paralysis. Obama took no further initiatives until after 2010 mid-term elections and no major policy change until his second term.

Biden’s policy announcements in the wake of July 11 were stop gap measures, not a comprehensive Cuba policy. Ironically, by initially delaying a broader policy announcement for six months because of domestic political worries, the White House made its political position more precarious. After the July 11 protests, any move to resume a policy of engagement is sure to be vilified by Republicans as rewarding the Cuban regime for its repression. As Biden’s domestic and foreign problems mount, Cuba is sliding further down the president’s policy agenda—a non-vital country where the White House thinks the political costs of action exceed the potential gains. But by leaving Trump’s sanctions in place, Biden risks exacerbating the economic crisis on the island, triggering another outburst of unrest, and increasing the chances of a new migration crisis.

“Cuba is a domestic issue for the United States and not a foreign policy issue,” Brent Scowcroft, President George H. W. Bush’s national security adviser, observed in 1998.<sup>25</sup> Twenty-three years later, not much has changed.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> “On anniversary of Obama visit, Cubans fret over whether Biden will resume détente,” Reuters, March 19, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/anniversary-obama-visit-cubans-fret-over-whether-biden-will-resume-detente-2021-03-19/>; EFE, “Biden’s campaign criticizes blocking of remittances to Cubans,” OnCuba News, October 29, 2020.

<https://oncubanews.com/en/cuba-usa/bidens-campaign-criticizes-blocking-of-remittances-to-cubans/>

<sup>2</sup> “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, March 9, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/03/09/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-and-deputy-director-of-the-national-economic-council-bharat-ramamurti-march-9-2021/>

<sup>3</sup> Latin America Program, Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, “Transcript: Trump or Biden: What Would It Mean for Latin America and the Caribbean?” September 21, 2020, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Transcript\\_Trump%20or%20Biden\\_%20What%20Would%20it%20Mean%20for%20Latin%20America%20and%20the%20Caribbean.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Transcript_Trump%20or%20Biden_%20What%20Would%20it%20Mean%20for%20Latin%20America%20and%20the%20Caribbean.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Juan S. Gonzalez, “Joe Biden and the Future of the Americas,” *Americas Quarterly*, July 28, 2020. <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/joe-biden-and-the-future-of-the-americas/>

<sup>5</sup> Mary Ellen Klas, “‘Total systemic failure’: Florida Democrats suffer devastating election losses,” *Tampa Bay Times*, November 4, 2020. <https://www.tampabay.com/news/florida-politics/elections/2020/11/04/total-systemic-failure-florida-democrats-suffer-devastating-election-losses/>

<sup>6</sup> Nora Gámez Torres, “Sen. Bob Menendez asks for ‘tangible results’ in possible negotiations with Cuba under Biden,” February, 2021, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article249318795.html>

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Desiderio and Nahal Toosi, “The road to Joe Biden's foreign policy runs through Bob Menendez,” *Politico*, March 2, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/01/biden-foreign-policy-bob-menendez-472097>

<sup>8</sup> P. Scott Shearer | Feb 05, 2021, “Senate Ag supports Vilsack confirmation,” National Hog Farmer, <https://www.nationalhogfarmer.com/agenda/senate-ag-supports-vilsack-confirmation>

<sup>9</sup> “A Good Neighbor Policy: Towards A Peaceful Hemisphere,” September 30, 2020. [https://www.codepink.org/over\\_100\\_organizations\\_call\\_on\\_biden\\_to\\_adopt\\_a\\_new\\_good\\_neighbor\\_policy\\_towards\\_latin\\_america](https://www.codepink.org/over_100_organizations_call_on_biden_to_adopt_a_new_good_neighbor_policy_towards_latin_america)

<sup>10</sup> “Press Release: 56 groups urge the Biden-Harris administration to take immediate action to normalize U.S.-Cuba relations,” Latin America Working Group, February 10, 2021. Text of the

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letter is here: <https://www.lawg.org/wp-content/uploads/Cuba-letter-to-President-Biden-February-2021.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Cuba Study Group, “Cuba Study Group publishes comprehensive policy vision for U.S.-Cuba relations in the Biden era,” press release, February 16, 2021, [http://cubastudygroup.org/press\\_releases/cuban-american-business-leaders-call-on-biden-administration-and-cuban-government-to-make-engagement-resilient-to-political-cycles/](http://cubastudygroup.org/press_releases/cuban-american-business-leaders-call-on-biden-administration-and-cuban-government-to-make-engagement-resilient-to-political-cycles/)

<sup>12</sup> The White House, “Statement by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. on Protests in Cuba,” July 12, 2021

<sup>13</sup> Statement by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. on Continuing Crackdown in Cuba,” The White House.

July 22, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/07/22/statement-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-on-continuing-crackdown-in-cuba/>;

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<sup>14</sup> David Shepardson, “U.S. reviewing whether it can help restore internet access in Cuba - Biden,” Reuters, July 15, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-reviewing-whether-it-can-help-restore-internet-access-cuba-2021-07-15/>

<sup>15</sup> “Remarks by President Biden at Meeting with Cuban American Leaders,” The White House, July 30, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/30/remarks-by-president-biden-at-meeting-with-cuban-american-leaders/>;  
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<sup>16</sup> “Nuevas sanciones y un concilio anticubano,” *Granma*, July 31, 2021, <http://www.granma.cu/mundo/2021-07-31/nuevas-sanciones-y-un-concilio-anticubano-video>

<sup>17</sup> Nelson Acosta, “Cubans applaud Biden win, hope for easing of sanctions, Reuters, November 7, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-cuba/cubans-applaud-biden-win-hope-for-easing-of-sanctions-idUSKBN27N0Z5>

<sup>18</sup> “Cuba's president acknowledges Biden's U.S. election win,” Reuters, November 8, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-cuba/cubas-president-acknowledges-bidens-u-s-election-win-idUSKBN27O0MC>

<sup>19</sup> “La Habana espera que Biden revierta las sanciones de Trump 'en el corto plazo',” *Diario de Cuba*, January 21, 2021. [https://diariodecuba.com/cuba/1611259928\\_28214.html](https://diariodecuba.com/cuba/1611259928_28214.html)

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Cuba rejects US slanders about counterterrorism cooperation,” May 27, 2021. <http://www.minrex.gob.cu/en/node/4640>

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<sup>21</sup> Barack Obama, “Press Conference by The President In Trinidad And Tobago,” April 19, 2009. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/press-conference-president-trinidad-and-tobago-4192009>

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Washington’s accusation in its report that Cuba engages in people trafficking is a lie,” July 3, 2021. <http://www.minrex.gob.cu/en/node/4812>

<sup>23</sup> Gladys Leydis Ramos López and Juan Diego Nusa Peñalver, “We defend the Revolution, above all else,” Granma, July 12, 2021. <http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2021-07-12/we-defend-the-revolution-above-all-else>.

<sup>24</sup> Nepstad identifies moral outrage as a key element in mobilizing mass uprisings in non-violent revolutions. Sharon Erikson Nepstad, *Nonviolent Revolutions: Civil Resistance in the Late 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Frank Davies, “White House considers plan for commission to carry out a bipartisan review,” *Miami Herald*, November 24, 1998.