

Breaking the Cycle of History:
The Inherent Benefits of Improving U.S. Relations with Cuba

MPP Professional Paper

In Partial Fulfillment of the Master of Public Policy Degree Requirements
The Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs
The University of Minnesota

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05/15/2019

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Preface

In January of 2016, my airplane touched-down at Jose Marti International Airport—just outside of Havana, Cuba. As I exited the aircraft and walked across the tarmac, I was struck with the realization that I had entered an environment of which I had no understanding. Throughout my six days on the island, through my interactions with artists, academics and everyday Cubans, this sentiment was reinforced and amplified. I was captivated. I had never been to a place that so stimulated and challenged my perceptions of the world. Of course, as a citizen of the United States, a significant aspect of my experience revolved around Cuba’s relationship with my own country and the intimate history the two have shared over the years. It is a history full of complexity and contradiction, and I struggled to comprehend its many nuances.

On one of my last days in Havana, I received some clarity. While sampling rum at the Havana Club museum, I started some small talk with one of the bartenders. As he poured me a glass, he asked where I was from. I told him the United States, in the far northern and central part of the country. Without hesitation, he replied, “Ah, the United States, so close but so far away.” I was taken aback, and his words have stayed with me since. The phrase itself is simple, and for most people that know anything about the two countries, it is obvious. In these few words, however, this man encapsulated the countless paradoxes that have characterized the relationship between Cuba and the United States for six decades—one that still exists largely unchanged.

Now, over three years later, his words remain in my head as I write. Although I am by no means an expert on U.S.-Cuba relations, my knowledge on the topic has expanded considerably since that day. Despite this, I find that the bartender’s paradox still holds true. As a complete outsider to this issue—a Minnesotan of Scandinavian descent—it has been fascinating to delve

into. I have consulted a wide array of sources in search of why Cuba and the United States are “so close but so far away,” but with each new book, government report, or individual interview, it seems to become more difficult to answer. What *has* been evident throughout my research is that no one side bears all of the blame for the current situation between the United States and Cuba. That being said, there is one of them that can—and should—remedy it.

Introduction

Many Americans have at least some knowledge of the difficult history between the United States and its closest Caribbean neighbor. Throughout the latter half of the 20th Century and into the 21st, Fidel Castro and a succession of U.S. presidents have driven many aspects of foreign policy not only in the region, but the entire globe. This dynamic has been characterized by conflict, and, on many occasions, the animosity between the United States and Cuba has erupted into a crisis. The examples are many—with no shortage of notoriety. In 1961, there was the C.I.A.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion, considered by many as one of the most monumental blunders in the history of U.S. foreign policy. The following year, there was the Cuban Missile Crisis (October Crisis in Cuba), in which the world came, in the words of then-Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, “within a hair’s breadth” of nuclear war.¹ In 1980, there was the Mariel Boatlift, a refugee fiasco that involved more than a hundred-thousand Cubans crossing the perilous ocean to South Florida. The list goes on, and it continues to this very day, as Cuba and the United States are now on opposite sides of in an international standoff regarding the fate of the government of Venezuela. Clearly, relations between the United States and Cuba have been and will remain a source of potential crises for the region and the globe. That is, unless something changes.

While it is true that relations between these “Closest of Enemies” have ebbed and flowed depending on a variety of factors, the *modus operandi* with which both countries have approached negotiations has not.ⁱⁱ To grossly oversimplify, the major impediment to a full-top rapprochement on the Cuban side has been the unwillingness to compromise its sovereignty, and for the United States, it has been the desire to compel the Cuban Government to alter its ideology and practices. Neither side has budged on these underlying positions. This presents a problem because they are inherently linked. On one hand, Havana views demands by the Washington to undergo such monumental as an affront to its national sovereignty. On the other, Washington views Havana’s defense of its sovereignty as an excuse to uphold a backwards government framework, which has been fueled in no small measure by the political clout of the Cuban-American community. No matter the administration in Washington, the conditions within both countries, or occurrences on the world stage, this diplomatic incompatibility has persisted.

Because of this, the relationship between the United States and Cuba has been, in a sense, stuck on a treadmill since 1959. At some points, conditions improve and jump ahead; at others, they deteriorate and regress. However, the needle is never truly able to move forward because neither side is willing to make concessions on what is seen as their bottom line. This is not to understate some of the real advancements that negotiations have brought in the past—cooperation on terrorism, narcotrafficking, humanitarian relief efforts, and others—but the fruits of diplomatic efforts will continue to be minor and ephemeral as long as both sides refuse to adequately address the root of this decades-long animosity. In the starkest terms, either the Cuban Government must adhere to U.S. demands to change its internal institutions and policies, or the United States must adapt to view the Cuban Government as the legitimate political authority on the island rather than simply a temporary placeholder. For either side to do this

would represent a political capitulation sixty years in the making—a seemingly impossible position for most governments.

On December 17, 2014, it looked as though relations would break free from this treadmill. That day, U.S. President, Barack Obama, declared in a nationally-televised speech that the United States “...[W]ill end an outdated approach that for decades has failed to advance our interests, and instead, we will begin to normalize our relations between our two countries.”ⁱⁱⁱ This announcement was the result of over a year of secret negotiations between a handful of high-level officials in each government, with help from external entities, most notably the Catholic Church. They resulted in a number of milestones, including over twenty bilateral agreements on matters ranging from trade, travel, and immigration, as well as a full restoration of diplomatic ties.^{iv} These strides were substantive and important, and they should not be downplayed. Despite this watershed moment, however, the Obama Administration failed to bring lasting change to relations between the United States and Cuba. Now, less than five years later, the Trump Administration has reinstated some of the restrictions lifted by Obama, diplomatic ties have been all but severed (though still technically remain), and the level of rhetorical venom toward one another has reached a parity with some of the most hostile periods in the two countries’ storied history.

From Washington’s perspective, before considering *how* to forge a path forward and prevent a similar regression, the question of *why* must be addressed. Therein lies the focus of this paper. That is, is it in the national interests to put forth an effort to finally normalize relations with Havana? After all, the United States is one of the preeminent powers on Earth; Cuba is a small, island nation with a population of barely over eleven million. This dichotomy may seem difficult to reconcile, but complacency in foreign policy has rarely proved to be constructive.

With that in mind, the question becomes: do the drawbacks to normalizing relations with Cuba outweigh the potential benefits? If the evidence confirms this, then the current course of action is desirable. If not, the United States government should adapt its policies to reap rewards currently precluded by the dynamic with its southern neighbor. As of now, the state of relations between the United States and Cuba is damaging the national interests of the United States. Not only are there latent advantages in terms of geopolitics, hemispheric stability and relations, economics and trade, and cooperation on transnational issues that are unable to be capitalized on, but there are also serious risks in each of these aforementioned areas associated with failing to achieve rapprochement. Therefore, if the United States wishes to act in accordance with its national interests, it should unilaterally normalize relations with Cuba. This is defined as lifting the embargo, acknowledging the Cuban Government as legitimate, ceasing efforts to alter its institutions and frameworks, and establishing normal diplomatic ties on an equal footing.

President Obama was correct in acknowledging the need to change a “failed policy” toward Cuba, but he did not go far enough in his attempts to do so. That is why many of the accomplishments of his thaw have been so easily nullified by the Trump Administration. Essentially, President Obama did not successfully reframe how the U.S. foreign policy apparatus and the public views this country’s relationship with Cuba. Over the past six decades, diplomatic efforts have been approached by both sides on a *quid pro quo* basis. That is, each has demanded concessions from the other in exchange for their own. Efforts have reached an impasse whenever their respective bottom lines are threatened—Cuba’s sovereignty and the desire of the United States to restructure its counterpart’s systems and institutions. For all of the milestones it achieved, the 2014 thaw failed to address these fundamental issues.

If the United States is to move forward and collect the benefits inherent in normalizing relations with Cuba, the lens through which efforts to do so are viewed must be altered. Up until now, this lens has been characterized by the belief that the United States, in order to change its punitive policies, must extract concessions from the Cuban Government. U.S. officials have therefore been prevented from fully and aggressively pursuing rapprochement, even if they have desired to. Many dissenters have argued that full-stop, unilateral normalization from the U.S. side would be a capitulation—a measure that would signify victory for the Cuban Government in its sixty-year struggle against the United States. This approach to the issue is futile and dangerous. It is rooted in a basic assumption that has led to numerous foreign policy blunders in the past: the United States has the right to determine the internal structures and institutions of a sovereign nation. This clouds the judgment of policymakers, encouraging them to view the issue in terms of victory and defeat when it is not warranted. Instead, it should be appraised in terms of gain and loss.

The United States can, and should, unilaterally normalize relations with Cuba. Once again, this is defined as lifting the embargo, acknowledging the Cuban Government as legitimate, ceasing efforts to alter its institutions and frameworks, and establishing normal diplomatic ties on an equal footing. The benefits far outweigh the risks. Some will argue this represents capitulation to an adversary—a government that has repeatedly challenged the United States in the international arena. It does not. Others will argue that this would be an endorsement of the structure or practices of the Cuban Government, which represses dissent, practices arbitrary detention and imprisonment, restricts expression, and engages in other activities that have been routinely criticized by human rights groups worldwide.^v It is not. Rather, unilateral

normalization is a recognition that it is futile and inappropriate for Washington to continue its attempts to strong-arm Havana into submission.

This paper is organized into three sections. First, a more in-depth look into the historical trajectory of U.S.-Cuba relations will provide an understanding of why both countries have failed to progress beyond the adversarial dynamic of the last six decades. More specifically, the first section aims to further illuminate how Havana's determination to protect its sovereignty and Washington's determination to alter Cuba's government have precluded normalization. The goal in this is to manifest the need of the United States to reframe its approach to negotiations.

The second section endeavors to argue *why* the United States should reframe its approach. The benefits of unilateral normalization are laid out and analyzed in detail. Importantly, these benefits are not subject to successfully imposing preconditions on the Cuban Government in the event of rapprochement. In addition, this paper focuses strictly of the U.S. perspective on the issue; it will not assess the benefits of improving relations for Cuba or the Cuban people. That is a different subject entirely.

The final section includes the conclusion to the central arguments and its broader implications, as well as a more detailed account of its criticisms. Advocating for a monumental policy change without reciprocity is controversial, especially given the history between the United States and Cuba. The bottom line is, the United States must move past the mentality that adapting policy towards its adversaries necessarily represents a defeat. In fact, as should be clear in this case, it can enable a host of victories in the form of benefits gained and risks mitigated. Thus, this article does not go into the political machinations necessary for such a change, but rather, it attempts to create the foundation to encourage those machinations to take place.

Three Case Studies in U.S.-Cuba Relations: Carter, Clinton, and Obama

In the aggregate, U.S.-Cuba relations since 1959 have been on a continuous loop, oscillating between thaws and freezes depending on a number of factors. There have been numerous occasions when serious dangers have sprung forth as a result of the tensions between Havana and Washington. These, however, are not the norm. What is typical of this longstanding relationship is the tendency to creep very gradually toward normalization, and then, all of the energy put into such efforts is mitigated by either a new administration in Washington, or a crisis in bilateral or multilateral relations. Subsequently, the process begins all over again. In this sense, the cliché “one step forward, two steps back” rings true.

To gain a sense of the cyclical nature of U.S.-Cuba relations, its ebb and flow will be examined through the process of negotiations between the two governments. This section emphasizes the administrations that have devoted more energy to rapprochement: Carter, Clinton, and Obama. This is not suggesting that others did not make some significant advances, but those three presidencies are good case studies into how gradual, reciprocal steps to normalization can quickly be dashed. Democrats have typically been more open to normalization than Republicans, as the latter has often shaped policy toward Cuba to appease the critical Cuban-American voting bloc in South Florida, which has traditionally opposed attempts to thaw relations.^{vi} It should be noted, however, that underlying the specific policy measures of each president has been the same unwillingness to abandon the need to alter Cuba’s governmental structure and institutions, which has caused negotiations based upon a *quid pro quo* to grind to a halt. Because of this, no president has aggressively pushed for full-stop, unilateral normalization.

Carter

A few months after taking office in 1977, U.S. President, Jimmy Carter, issued Presidential Directive NSC-6, in which he stated: “I have concluded that we should attempt to achieve normalization of our relations with Cuba.”^{vii} This document emphasized the advantages to the national interests of such a measure, identifying a number of specific areas that would be affected.^{viii} There was reason to be optimistic, as “No president before or since ha[d] made as determined an effort to normalize U.S.-Cuba relations.”^{ix} Years later, however, Carter lamented his lack of progress on the matter: “I think in retrospect, knowing what I know since I left the White House, I should have gone ahead and been more flexible in dealing with Cuba and established full diplomatic relations.”^x This statement suggests that the former president—in reflection and free from the pressures of his previous office—realized the futility of his negotiation strategy. In NSC-6, his orders to the Secretary of State for the rapprochement process provides a hint as to why his efforts were ultimately unsuccessful: “... [B]egin exploratory talks with Cuba with the intention that they will lead to appropriate, reciprocal and sequential steps looking toward normalization of relations between our two countries.”^{xi} Thus, from the outset, Carter’s aspirations to improve Washington’s relationship with Havana faced a difficult challenge; the approach, although well-intentioned, failed to reframe the issue and continued to focus on the need to extract concessions from the Cuban Government.

Carter’s administration moved gradually in its bilateral efforts, as they were rooted in “reciprocal and sequential” measures.^{xii} Although Cuba’s role in the U.S.-Soviet Cold War rivalry was inherently a roadblock, it was still recognized that “normalization would serve the long-term interests of the United States.”^{xiii} The Carter administration began with low-hanging fruits. Immediately after his election, “...[R]econnaissance overflights, a U.S. staple since the

1962 missile crisis, were quietly stopped.”^{xiv} In addition, the President chose not to renew the ban on travel to Cuba by U.S. citizens.^{xv} Havana responded to these olive branches by proposing talks on maritime borders, and Washington acknowledged this overture by initiating diplomatic discussions.^{xvi} The culmination of the burgeoning bilateral activity was the opening of interest sections in each country’s former embassy buildings on September 1, 1977, which, though not technically embassies, were to function in a similar fashion. As a result, there was an outlook of tempered optimism across the Florida Straits. Wayne Smith, who President Carter would appoint as Chief of Mission of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana in 1979, recalled that “...[R]elations between Cuba and the U.S. were now improving.” This was not to last, however. The trouble would come not from the Caribbean but across the Atlantic in Africa. Negotiations would become stuck on developments on the other side of the world, and the ultimate goal of normalization was lost in what devolved into calculations that were rooted political posturing. Thus, the “reciprocal and sequential” strategy, the success of which depends on the assumption that developments external to the diplomatic dialogue remain unchanged, was compromised.

Throughout Carter’s four years as president, there was one broad political obstacle that continued to flout efforts to improve relations with Cuba. This was the presence of Cuban troops in various African conflicts, which had become flash points of the broader Cold War conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Cuban military personnel had been deployed throughout the continent to assist various countries in their struggles for independence and to frustrate U.S. attempts to bring them into the West’s orbit. That being said, the President and his foreign policy advisors deemed that curtailing Havana’s involvement in Africa—namely Angola and Ethiopia—would be an essential precondition to bilateral negotiations.^{xvii} In fact, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s National Security Advisor, publicly declared on November 16, 1977 that the

recent surge of Cuban troops in Angola rendered further progress between the United States and Cuba “impossible.”^{xviii} This backed the Carter Administration into a political corner, and it increased the Cuban leadership’s suspicion towards their counterparts in Washington.^{xix} By February 1978, Cuba, with the Soviet Union’s backing, had deployed around 15,000 troops to Ethiopia to support its struggle against neighboring Somalia, which was receiving support from the United States.^{xx} Any progression of U.S.-Cuba dialogue was now firmly tethered to the situation in Africa. In Wayne Smith’s assessment:

“With the arrival of Cuban troops in Ethiopia, the freeze on the normalization process which Brzezinski had announced on November 16 of the previous year hardened into a rigid refusal to contemplate even minor steps forward until those troops were withdrawn. The whole idea of a step-by-step process based on reciprocity was shelved for good.”^{xxi}

Thus, Washington came to view its talks with Havana as a battle to gain the political advantage abroad rather than focusing on the potential benefits at home, which had been personally acknowledged and outlined by Carter at the outset of his tenure.

By the latter half of President Carter’s four years, the *quid pro quo* dynamic that had hamstrung progress in U.S.-Cuba relations since 1959 had been firmly entrenched. The United States resorted to demands for substantial changes to Cuban Government policies in exchange for progress, and predictably, Fidel Castro refused based on safeguarding the sovereignty of his nation. He vehemently protested the imposition of preconditions, asserting the double-standard that “We have never discussed with you the activities of the United States throughout the entire world.”^{xxii} His bottom line had been threatened. Efforts to improve U.S.-Cuba relations during the Carter administration would never overcome the situation in Africa and the political issues it caused, and by 1980, the crisis surrounding the Mariel boatlift all but precluded any progress in the twilight of Carter’s tenure from taking place. After four years of deadlock, relations between

the United States and Cuba severely regressed with the subsequent elections of President Ronald Reagan and President George H.W. Bush, who returned to policies of isolation and coercion.

Clinton

Like Carter before him, President Bill Clinton understood the benefits of altering U.S. policy toward Cuba, but—just as his predecessor—he was unable to achieve full-stop normalization. In Clinton’s view, “Anybody with half a brain could see the embargo was counterproductive,” and he did make some energetic efforts to improve relations across the Florida Straits.^{xxiii} However, similar to every other American president since 1959, he and his administration failed to reframe U.S.-Cuba relations in a manner that would have enabled complete normalization. In other words, the President remained committed to a policy that required Cuba to change its institutions and policies. The need to extract political concessions from the Cuban Government—influenced heavily by South Florida’s Cuban-American community—overshadowed the benefits inherent in improving relations. In the words of one of Clinton’s National Security Council staffers, the United States was “[C]ommitted to the goal of promoting peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba” and, in a “calibrated fashion,” would “encourage continued progress in political and economic reforms.”^{xxiv} Thus, a gradual, reciprocal rapprochement was pursued by the United States between 1992 and 2000, which, in a familiar manner, threatened Cuba’s bottom-line and introduced numerous impediments that prevented further progress. Reflecting on his policies toward Cuba, President Clinton expressed frustration that, by the end of his tenure, most of the advancements he had fought for had been “wiped out.”^{xxv}

The “calibrated response” strategy to improve relations with Havana was initiated soon after the 42nd President took office. In early 1993, he expanded opportunities for people-to-people contacts between the U.S. and Cuba, with the U.S. Treasury Department extending licensed travel to humanitarian, religious, and educational purposes.^{xxvi} In response, Fidel Castro released four prominent dissidents from prison, eased travel restrictions on Cuban-Americans to the island, and handed-over two cocaine traffickers to U.S. authorities that had been intercepted in Cuba’s territorial waters.^{xxvii} Steady communication continued from both sides over the next year, and incremental progress gave credence to the White House’s reciprocal approach to negotiations.

By the summer of 1994, the economic repercussions from the fall of the Soviet Union had caused chaos in Cuba. In what would be known as the Balsero Crisis, thousands of Cubans were embarking daily on makeshift rafts for South Florida to escape the dire situation on the island. To stop this flow of humanity, Havana and Washington used the cooperation of the previous two years as a foundation for substantial immigration talks. On September 1, 1994, negotiators from both governments began formal discussions, and by September 9, a landmark accord on legal migration across the Florida Straits had been finalized.^{xxviii} In this brief period of time, the United States completely transformed its immigration policy toward Cuba, ending practices that encouraged “irregular” migration to its shores. In return, Cuba pledged to “take effective measures in every way possible to prevent unsafe departures” from the island.^{xxix} The agreement successfully ended the Balsero Crisis. By September 18, the number of rafts intercepted each day by the U.S. Coast Guard had dwindled from over a thousand to none.^{xxx} Washington and Havana had shown one another that mutual progress was possible.

According to the “calibrated response” strategy of the White House, this should have built trust and created more momentum toward achieving normalization. At first, it did. In the following years, the militaries of both countries mutually-improved operating procedures at the U.S. military installation at Guantanamo Bay, and Clinton relaxed Cuban-American remittances to the island and travel restrictions.^{xxxii} In line with precedent, however, the progress was not to continue. From the beginning, political preoccupations heavily influenced Clinton’s view of U.S.-Cuba relations; he was very sensitive to the powerful Cuban-American voting bloc in Florida, a critical swing-state.^{xxxiii} When relations were trending in a positive direction, as they seemed to be in the first couple years of his tenure, the political risks of cooperating with Havana were not so severe. Later developments, however, would force the President to favor a hardline toward Cuba.

Two events in the latter half of Clinton’s tenure would place immense political pressure on his administration and influence policy decisions that caused a regression in U.S.-Cuba relations for years to come. On February 24, 1996, the Cuban military shot down two civilian aircraft piloted by the Brothers to the Rescue, a Cuban-American exile group based out of Miami. On top of the fact that four people tragically lost their lives, President Clinton had a political crisis on his hands, with Congress and the American public clamoring for a decisive response.^{xxxiii} “The shoot-down left the Clinton Administration politically naked,” recalled Dan Fiske, a staffer for North Carolina Senator and Chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Jesse Helms, at that time.^{xxxiv} For several years leading up to the incident, anti-Castro forces in Congress, including Senator Helms and Indiana Representative, Dan Burton, had been waiting for an opportunity to push legislation through Congress to ramp up pressure on the Cuban Government, battling with President Clinton every step of the way.^{xxxv} They found one in

the Brothers to the Rescue incident. A mere three weeks after the shutdown, Clinton acquiesced and signed the Helms-Burton bill into law, the purpose of which was assist “a transition government leading to a democratically elected government in Cuba.”^{xxxvi} The law codified regime change as the official and uniform policy of the United States towards Cuba, and it ensured that the only way the embargo could be wholly undone was by a future act of Congress. Thus, “[T]he core premise of Clinton’s policy of calibrated response was vitiated. Quid pro quo was no longer a viable strategy because Washington could offer no quids for Cuban quos.”^{xxxvii}

Complicating matters further and shattering any hopes of salvaging things after the Brothers to the Rescue incident was a five-year old Cuban, Elian Gonzalez, found by the U.S. Coast Guard floating in the Florida Straits in November of 1999. The boy was taken to live with relatives in Miami, who claimed custody, but his father, still in Cuba, asserted his right to raise his son. A fierce international custody battle ensued, with Havana demanding Elian’s return and the Cuban-American community in South Florida pressuring the Clinton Administration to grant him citizenship. Eventually, federal forces forcibly returned the boy to his father in Cuba after his Miami relatives refused to allow him to leave.^{xxxviii} The fiasco embarrassed the Clinton Administration, hardened attitudes between Washington and Havana, and enraged the Cuban-American community. In the estimation of the former head of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, Vicki Huddleston, the episode “[H]ad as momentous an impact [on U.S.-Cuba relations] as the failed CIA-backed exile invasion at the Bay of Pigs.”^{xxxix} The political fallout for Clinton and his political allies was significant. In what would be deemed as *el voto castigo* (the punishment vote), the Cuban-American community overwhelmingly supported George W. Bush in the 2000 presidential election against his opponent and Clinton’s former Vice President, Al Gore.^{xl}

Clinton's policies towards Cuba were, in many ways, consistent with the broader tendencies in U.S.-Cuba relations. His calibrated response approach ensured the slow-moving, *quid pro quo* dynamic that has failed to bring about lasting change over the past six decades. Because Clinton failed to reframe his push for better relations in a way that promoted unilateral and sweeping normalization for its inherent benefits, his efforts were compromised and therefore incomplete. What began as promising steps toward normalization morphed into political posturing and face-saving—in large part due to the repercussions from the Brothers to the Rescue shutdown and the Elian Gonzalez custody fiasco. In addition, these incidents played an important role in George W. Bush's 2000 election, so whatever gains Clinton managed to retain until the end of his presidency were in jeopardy from the incoming administration. Indeed, President Bush would go on to implement some of the harshest policies toward the Cuban Government since 1959, and after eight years of his presidency, any gains that remained at the end of the Clinton administration had been all but nullified.

Obama

Barack Obama's December 17, 2014 thaw announcement and the policy measures it included was a monumental episode in U.S.-Cuba relations, but—in the same vein as Carter, Clinton, and all of his other predecessors—complete and lasting normalization eluded him. Between January 2015 and President Obama's final days in office, the United States and Cuba signed over twenty bilateral agreements. Among them were the reestablishment of diplomatic relations, frameworks for environmental cooperation, pledges to collaborate on matters of law enforcement and narcotrafficking, an easing of travel restrictions, increased opportunity for commercial ties, and many more.^{xli} They were nothing short of a milestone.

They were, however, part of a gradual, step-by-step process toward normalization, which, as in the past, was sure to experience complications eventually. Obama's opening was too little, too late, and the eventual complication would be Donald Trump's election in 2016. For as big of a step forward as the thaw was, the lens through which it was approached was not all that different from the traditional *quid pro quo* of prior attempts at normalization. As Ben Rhodes, one of Obama's chief negotiators in the opening with Cuba, recounted, the United States, throughout the rapprochement, would continue to push for domestic reforms and "...[T]o support multiparty democracy."^{xlii} In fact, despite the more conciliatory rhetoric from both sides, the Obama administration did not alter a number of policies and programs that to promote democracy on the island, which, from the perspective of the Cuban government, represented a continuation of affronts to its national sovereignty.^{xliii} Thus, the significant efforts made toward rapprochement during the Obama years were primed to be nullified by the Trump administration. They failed to fully reframe the issue from one of political reciprocity to one that emphasized the inherent benefits of full-stop, unilateral normalization, as previously defined.

Most of the Obama administration's engagement with Cuba came in the latter years of its final term in office. In December 2013, Raul Castro and Barack Obama's publicly shook hands at Nelson Mandela's funeral, marking the first time such a gesture had been shared by the countries' heads of state since before 1959. This garnered global attention.^{xliv} What the world did not know at the time, however, was that secret negotiations had been taking place between high-level officials of both the United States and Cuba. The governments had already begun the process of rapprochement. At first, progress was slow-moving. Both sides needed to secure the release of personnel being held by the other. For the United States, securing the release of Alan Gross—a USAID contractor that had been accused of spying and imprisoned on the island since

2011—and another, confidential U.S. intelligence agent were crucial, and for Cuba, freeing the remaining members of the “Cuban Five,” Cuban intelligence officers that had been incarcerated since 1998 for espionage charges in Miami, was equally important.^{xlv} When negotiations involve a prisoner swap, their pace is expected to be incremental. But the other major bargaining points in those discussions included “the reform of Cuba’s economy and political system” and a host of other stipulations from the American side that had caused Havana to recoil in the past.^{xlvi} Nevertheless, the effort kept moving forward, aided by some key third-party actors that included the Pope himself, but valuable time was being wasted. When December 17, 2014 arrived and President Obama made his historic announcement, just over two years remained of his second term.

Those next two years saw the implementation of many of the aforementioned accords that resulted from the prior, months-long negotiations. During that time, relations progressed faster and further than ever before. Embassies in Washington and Havana were opened for the first time since 1959; travel and trade restrictions were loosened; Cuba was removed from the U.S. State Department’s list states sponsoring terrorism; and the both countries agreed on new immigration policies.^{xlvii} It was by far the most comprehensive set of reforms in six decades. As Ben Rhodes recounted, “We wanted to push as far as we could to open a door for American travel and business,” and this sentiment was reciprocated by the government of Cuba.^{xlviii} The rapprochement culminated in President Obama’s trip to the island in March 2016, the first visit by a sitting U.S. president since Calvin Coolidge in the 1920’s. This was yet another milestone, and the gravity of such a gesture cannot be minimized.

Despite all of the symbolic and substantive significance of 2014 to 2016 in U.S.-Cuba relations, familiar forces were at work behind the scenes. Both sides continued to be rigid on

their respective bottom-lines—Cuba’s sovereignty and desired political alterations from Washington. This is encapsulated in an exchange between Raul Castro and Ben Rhodes in Havana, just prior to Obama’s arrival:

“I tried—again and again—to steer the conversation back to our demands. We wanted to Cuba to expand its nascent private sector. We wanted Cuba to reform its economy, to allow foreign businesses to hire Cubans directly, and to show more restraint in its treatment of protesters... ‘You know,’ Raul said to me, ‘a thought occurred to me that I have never shared. The Americans like to give people candy’... ‘They like to give people candy for doing whatever they want in Latin America. But Cuba is not interested in candy.’”^{xlix}

Thus, even though President Obama took some unprecedented action, his administration never completely shed the need to extract the traditional concessions from Havana.

In the end, the thaw fell short of full-stop normalization as defined in this paper. Specifically, the aspects that Obama missed on were fully acknowledging the Cuban Government as legitimate and ceasing efforts to alter its institutions and frameworks. Failing to do so cost the President and his administration a chance to secure lasting change. If there’s anything that examining U.S.-Cuba relations over the last sixty years can manifest, it’s that a great degree of progress can be all but eliminated virtually overnight. That is what Donald Trump’s election meant for his predecessor’s efforts. Much of the progress made between December 2014 and January 20, 2017 was nullified, and currently, there is little to no engagement between Havana and Washington. In fact, animosity is surging, and relations are rapidly regressing. The Obama administration fell into the familiar *quid pro quo* routine by which Clinton, Carter, and others before him had endeavored to improve relations. In this case, it consumed valuable time in a scenario in which the clock was ticking, and it precluded the bold and sweeping action needed to ensure that normalization was not simply a fleeting idea but a permanent condition.

Carter, Clinton, Obama: Takeaways

There is a clear issue that underlays the last sixty years of relations between the United States and Cuba. Even with Carter, Clinton, and Obama—the administrations most amenable to normalization—the United States has failed to directly address Cuba’s bottom-line. Because of this, regardless of how many agreements are signed, lasting change will continue to be elusive, if not impossible. The fact is, the issue of Cuba has always been framed in political terms, in which the United States has been preoccupied with coming away from the negotiating table with a political “win.” This entails, as one official in the Carter administration put it, forcing the Cubans to “behave.”^l No president wants to pursue unilateral normalization as defined in this paper because they do not want to look weak; they are averse to the political repercussions that would result from the United States radically changing a policy toward an adversary without demanding anything in return. Thus, these efforts have been characterized by tip-toes forward and stumbles backward, and this will continue as long as the Washington continues to view such an endeavor as a political capitulation to an adversarial government. If it can successfully be reframed, however, to emphasize the associated, inherent benefits, then achieving real and lasting progress becomes much more feasible.

Normalization: Inherent Benefits

Every U.S. president since 1959, in some way or another, has recognized the advantages of improving relations across the Florida Straits. Even President Kennedy, whose administration dealt with the most inflammatory period between the countries, understood that a functioning relationship was favorable to attempting to isolate and coerce Cuba into submission.^{li} In many

areas, the national interests of the United States would be immediately and tangibly influenced by the type of unilateral normalization advocated in this paper. In others, the gains would be more abstract and gradual. Regardless, it is important to note that none of them are able to be capitalized on with the current state of things. The United States should conduct its foreign policy in a manner that maximizes its ability to safeguard its interests. Thus, there is a real incentive to alter the status quo.

The benefits of unilateral normalization by Washington are wide-ranging and substantial. They are also not restricted to bilateral relations between the United States and Cuba, but rather, applicable to this country's standing with the region and the rest of the world. This section will identify and examine a number of categories, within the broader topic of U.S. national interests, that unilaterally normalizing relations with Cuba would benefit. They are broken-down into four subsections: global geopolitics, hemispheric stability, trade and economics, and transnational issues. It could be argued that some of the advantages noted in this section are speculative, but that is standard for any policy debate. Is not foreign policy a continuous series of decisions that attempt to anticipate how the other involved party or parties will react? The United States should frame its relations with other countries in terms of a rational and pragmatic appraisal of the anticipated positives and negatives rather than on purely political repercussions, which are often myopic, emotional, and impair the judgment of decision-makers. Thus, aside from the very explicit advantages that are enumerated in this section, the inherent benefit of such an approach should also be taken into account. As should be evident by the ebb and flow of U.S.-Cuba relations over the past six decades, a continuous assessment of the merit of a state's foreign policy is vital to protecting its national interests.

Global Geopolitics

Over the last two decades, powers hostile to the United States have employed both subtle and direct methods to challenge U.S. interests in the international arena, with China and Russia the most prominent offenders. In December of 2017, the White House released its National Security Strategy, which warned that “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to... repress their societies and expand their influence.”^{lii} In January of 2019, Graham Allison and Dimitri Simes published an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, entitled “A Sino-Russian Entente Again Threatens America,” suggesting that “[T]he defining challenge to U.S. national interests in the 21st century is a rising China” and a resurgent Russia.^{liii}

Many more have echoed these sentiments over the last decade, and for all their disagreements, there is one general idea in which they find harmony: the foreign policies pursued by Russia and China are a direct threat to the United States. From the Indian Ocean Region, to the Middle East, Eastern Europe, through Africa, and finally, Latin America, both countries have aggressively expanded their political, military, and economic leverage. Proclaiming a renewed Cold War may be a bit alarmist, but it is clear that the United States must move quickly and decisively to defend the institutions and principles it upholds in the global arena. Whatever the motivation for Russia and China to project their dominance increasingly broadly, the United States should be consolidating its alliances and cultivating new partnerships to create a bastion against such efforts.

For much of its history, Washington has been able to wield the Monroe Doctrine to maintain its dominance in Latin America and prevent intrusions from overseas, but there have been significant shifts in the last several decades. The driving force behind these developments?

China and Russia. In 2015, China pledged “\$500 billion in trade and \$250 billion in direct investment” to the Latin American and Caribbean region.^{liv} China has viewed it as “vibrant and promising,” aiming to stimulate a “golden period of development” throughout the United States’ southern neighbors.^{lv} China’s activity in Latin America is substantial and wide-ranging. It includes increasing both “soft” and “hard” diplomatic power by forging ties through “exchanges and dialogues, trade and investment, agriculture, energy, infrastructure, manufacturing, and technological innovation,” as well as carrying-out “military exchanges and cooperation.”^{lvi}

All of these efforts have made China both “Latin America’s largest creditor” and a major military benefactor in a short span of time.^{lvii} Since joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, China has loaned over \$22 billion to Latin American governments as of 2018.^{lviii} Since 2005, China has sold well over billion dollars’ worth of military materiel to countries in the region.^{lix} These sales have included helicopters to Argentina, fighter jets to Bolivia, satellite equipment and aircraft to Brazil, field hospital equipment to Peru, surveillance and satellite technology to Venezuela.^{lx} Washington has taken notice China’s opportunistic eye. Numerous high-ranking officials in the Trump administration have admonished politicians and the American public to view Beijing’s efforts with vigilance and as a threat to U.S. national interests.^{lxi}

Although not quite to the scale of their counterparts in Beijing, Moscow has also been spreading its influence throughout the Caribbean and Central and South America. According to John Kelly, who at the time was the head of the U.S. Southern Command (subsection of U.S. military responsible for operations in Central and South America), in a testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2015, Vladimir Putin’s government has “...[P]ursued an increased presence in Latin America through propaganda, military arms and equipment sales,

counterdrug agreements, and trade.”^{lxiii} Indeed, Russia has invested heavily in a number of companies in the region, especially in the energy sector; it has opened several military installations within its partnering states; and, in general, it has taken a more active interest in Western Hemisphere affairs.^{lxiii} One of Moscow’s latest shows of force involves the internal crisis in its long-time ally, Venezuela, in which it shipped “two nuclear capable bombers” to the country in support of President Maduro’s government.^{lxiv} This increased involvement has prompted alarm in Washington. Adm. Kurt W. Tidd, the former head of U.S. Southern Command and John Kelly’s successor, expanded upon his predecessor’s statement in his own testimony before the same body in February of last year, warning that “‘Russia’s increased role in our hemisphere is particularly concerning, given its intelligence and cyber capabilities’ and its ‘intent to upend international stability and order and discredit democratic institutions.’” Tidd went on to condemn Moscow’s “persistent, pernicious presence” and “visible force projection in the Western Hemisphere,” noting its potential to pose “...[A] critical threat to the U.S. homeland.”^{lxv}

As a part of Moscow’s broader strategy of “...deep[ening] its influence in Latin America,” it has significantly increased its engagement with and presence in Cuba in recent years.^{lxvi} Putin’s Russia reestablished the military, economic, and political ties that were once so strong between these Cold War allies. Moscow has invested heavily in its long-time partner in an array of sectors, including infrastructure, transportation, heavy industry, tourism, medicine, and more.^{lxvii} Trade between the countries jumped nearly 100% from 2016 to 2017, and this drastic uptick is expected to continue.^{lxviii} In fact, 2017 saw Russia resume, for the first time in decades, certain exports to the island that had once been staples of bilateral trade, such as automobiles and petroleum.^{lxix} For the U.S. national security community, perhaps the most alarming aspect of this

resurgent bonhomie is between the countries' militaries. In February 2018, Putin's government approved a \$43 million loan to Cuba's military, which granted "...[T]anks, armored vehicles and possibly helicopters."^{lxx} There have even been widespread reports that Moscow intends to "...[R]eactivate a Soviet-era signals intelligence (SIGINT) base in Cuba... and possibly open additional bases on the island as well."^{lxxi} Russia's presence in Cuba is significant; it is broad; and it will continue to grow.

Beijing has also amplified its engagement with Havana in recent decades. It also views the island as a key component in a broader strategy to increase its influence in Latin America. According to the C.I.A., Cuba's largest trading partner is China, and this role is expanding rapidly.^{lxxii} Cuba currently imports nearly one third of its total goods from China, and this proportion is reciprocated with exports.^{lxxiii} Beijing is Havana's largest debtholder, with a substantial number of projects on the island in infrastructure, tourism, telecommunications, mining, and energy planned or already underway.^{lxxiv} The Chinese government appears to be employing a model in Cuba similar to that which it uses in other countries, expanding its economic and political influence right to the doorstep of the United States.^{lxxv} There is also a military element to Beijing's presence on the island. Since 2015, high-level officials in each country's military have met for annual summits, reiterating their commitment to continue pursuing the "...[S]ubstantial development of military relations."^{lxxvi} There has been widespread speculation that China assisted in the development—and is involved in the ongoing operations—of an electronic surveillance station at Bejucal, which, from the western end of the island, is capable of monitoring military communications on the United States mainland.^{lxxvii} Clearly, China has been attempting to advance its economic, political, and military interests just ninety miles off the United States' coast.

Beijing and Moscow are free to pursue their interests in Cuba largely unchallenged, and until the United States reengages, this will be the case. As one Cuban expert put it, “Washington’s current policy of attempting to isolate Cuba is forcing it closer to the Vladimir Putin’s of the world.”^{lxxviii} The logic in this is obvious. Cuba is a small country lacking in wealth. Access to outside investment and resources is critical for the development of such countries. If this cannot be obtained from the United States, which has heavily sanctioned Cuba for decades, it will be from somewhere else. For many years, this was the role of the Soviet Union, and now it is increasingly so with China and Russia. Each is clearly more than eager to be the island’s patron for their own, self-serving reasons.

In this way, Washington’s unwillingness to adapt its stance toward its neighbor is detrimental in the broader scheme of geopolitics. It renders Cuba an obvious destination for the expansion of international authoritarianism, which is an explicit affront to those states ascribing to governance models that are “[R]ules-based, accountable, and open systems” like the United States.^{lxxix} In order to remain relevant in this increasingly intense global competition, Washington must endeavor to convince the world that its liberal, democratic principles offer the best blueprint for progress. Each state is valuable in this struggle, Cuba especially so, given its strategic value and proximity to the United States. Therefore, it is favorable to the national interests of the United States to engage with Cuba to confront Russia and China’s global expansion.

While by no means a panacea, the unilateral normalization for which this paper advocates would pose an immediate and direct challenge to Beijing and Moscow’s adventurism. In effect, it would present the opportunity to make up for the ground the U.S. is losing with its current policy. By becoming a major competitor, it would end China and Russia’s ability to pursue their

interests unimpeded. Following normalization, Washington would have much more room to maneuver in developing bilateral ties across the spectrum—economic, cultural, political, and more. Importantly, unlike China and Russia, the foundation already exists for the United States to do so organically. Aside from geographic proximity, there are a number of factors that render it a much more natural partner than the other two: a large Cuban-American population, shared aspects of culture and history, a past of cooperation on transnational issues, complimentary economic markets, and others. In essence, a Cuba within Russian and Chinese spheres of influence is by no means automatic or irreversible, especially with unilateral normalization inserting the United States into the equation.

The aftermath of the December 2014 Thaw was evidence that the United States and Cuba can quickly build bridges in the correct circumstances. In a short time, these connections permeated a number of aspects of bilateral relations. After the 2014 announcement, a flurry of activity between Cuban and American officials was initiated and sustained through the remainder of the Obama administration. Delegates from both countries met to discuss and advance agendas on a range of issues, including international trade, infrastructure, transnational security, the environment, mail services, education, internet and telecommunications, immigration, and more.^{lxxx} American tourism to the island exploded. 2015 saw a record-setting 3.5 million visitors to the island, rising to just under 4 million the following year, and peaking in 2017 at 4.7 total visitors, with nearly a third of those from the U.S.^{lxxxii} This had a ripple effect throughout the island. By June of 2015, Airbnb, which began offering its services in Cuba in April of that same year, witnessed a doubling of the number of homes available for rent on the island through its service, “making Cuba the company’s fastest growing market.”^{lxxxiii} American airlines and cruise ships once again filled Cuba’s runways and seaports, and “...[H]undreds of millions” were spent

by visitors in the island's burgeoning service industry.^{lxxxiii} On top of that, the Thaw fostered invaluable people-to-people contact between everyday Americans and Cubans, who were able to exchange ideas, build personal connections, and dispel myths about one another for the first time on a large scale since 1959. In sum, the years following the 2014 Thaw offered a fleeting glimpse of how normalization could forge sweeping connections across the Florida Straits that would challenge Moscow and Beijing's preeminence on the island.

With Donald Trump's election in 2016, much of the progress of the previous two years was wiped out. The sheer gravity of American engagement—government collaboration, commercial dealings and investment, tourism and people-to-people contact—had created ties with the island that checked Beijing and Moscow's unchecked dominance. The natural connection between the United States and Cuba was on full display. Now, with Trump's pivot, it is virtually non-existent, and Russia and China are again free to fill the void relatively unchallenged. This is dangerous. Top officials in Washington, including former Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, have expressed concern about the growing presence of outside "[P]redatory actors" in the Western Hemisphere, labeling it "alarming."^{lxxxiv} Clearly, it is a threat to the country, and Cuba is one of the areas where it is most significant. The Trump administration's attempts to bully Cuba into submission are simply pushing it back into the arms of Putin and Xi Jinping. Each passing month of this futile strategy renders Washington increasingly at a disadvantage. Reversing it with unilateral normalization would instantly deny Moscow and Beijing unencumbered dominance in yet another outlet for their international adventurism. It contributes to balancing the geopolitical scale back towards the United States.

Hemispheric Stability

While the United States' current relationship with Cuba is problematic in the global scheme of things, it is also a major point of contention in hemispheric relations. In a report from the Brookings Institution, which assessed the benefits of improved engagement with Latin America, it was concluded that, "Tensions generated by U.S. policies toward Cuba have affected the United States' image in the region and have hindered Washington's ability to work constructively in other countries."^{lxxxv} The majority of nations in Latin America have long protested Washington's unilateral isolation of Havana, especially in the 21st Century. In a June 2009 meeting of the Organization of American States, a body comprised of the thirty-five sovereign states of the Western Hemisphere, it was "...[D]ecided unanimously to cancel the 1962 resolution to exclude the Cuban government from the organization."^{lxxxvi} This decisive action was the culmination of the region's growing disenchantment with a punitive posture towards the Cuban Government, a statement that favored a path forward rather than the status quo.

Many of the traditional policies of the United States towards its southern neighbors have been counterproductive. Washington has a history of hegemonic behavior in the hemisphere, including economic exploitation, political manipulation, covert interference, and overt military conquest. That is not to say that U.S. relations with every country in the region are poor, but there is a pervasive sense of distrust amongst many governments and citizens from Cape Horn to the Rio Grande, and it hamstrings the ability of the Washington and its counterparts in Latin America to cooperate towards progress. That being said, Cuba is a sort of index by which the dynamic between United States and the region is gauged, and the current policy toward the island is emblematic of a history of coercion and strong-arm diplomacy.^{lxxxvii}

To be clear, the unilateral normalization proposed by this paper would not undo years of this complicated history. It would also not guarantee that sound relations would immediately flourish throughout the region. It would, however, send an important message that Washington is ready to move forward on an equal footing with its Latin American partners. The significance of such an action is very powerful. As Ben Rhodes observed in 2013 in the lead-up to his negotiations with Havana, rapprochement with Cuba “...[W]ould dramatically improve the standing of the United States in Latin America.”^{lxxxviii} In this way, it could eradicate some of the barriers of mistrust and animosity in the hemisphere, presenting a more viable atmosphere for cooperation on issues plaguing the region.

Latin America contains some of the most volatile conditions in the world. No matter the metric—poverty, wealth inequality, corruption, violence, displaced persons, to name a few—it is consistently struggling with destabilizing forces. A 2017 study by the United Nations revealed that the proportion of individuals living in poverty in the region was over thirty percent, with those living in extreme poverty at over ten percent.^{lxxxix} These figures appear to be increasing, amplified by underperforming large, regional countries, such as Argentina and Brazil.^{xc} Recent data from the World Bank show that a disproportionate number of countries with the world’s highest Gini indices, which measure wealth inequality, are found in Latin America and the Caribbean.^{xc} Systemic corruption on both a macro and micro level has prevented many nations from developing strong institutions that protect the rule of law.^{xcii} Central America and the Caribbean Basin are among the most violent areas in the world. Between 2000 and 2010 alone, the United Nations estimated that “[M]ore than one million people died as a consequence of an unlawfully purposefully inflicted killing by another person.”^{xciii} This number has been rising in the last decade, and figures in 2016 manifested that the region, which is just under ten percent of

the world's total population, accounts for around one third of all murders.^{xciv} The number of displaced persons originating in Latin American countries has also reached alarming levels, with several millions in Colombia and Venezuela, as well as hundreds of thousands in Central America's Northern Triangle.^{xcv} All of these factors combine to create a very precarious situation—one that directly impacts the national interests of the United States.

Cuba is a low-risk, high-reward starting point for beginning the process of building coalitions to address these issues. As of now, U.S. policy toward Cuba is alienating potential partners and allies in the fight against regional instability. Former head of the U.S. Special Interests Section in Havana, Vicki Huddleston, labeled it as “dumb,” arguing that it “makes hemispheric relations very messy, offers very little credibility in terms of human rights, and hurts our relationships” throughout the hemisphere.^{xcvi} In general, 21st Century Latin American governments have not accepted “...[T]he implicit assertion that the United States [is] the extraordinary beacon of democracy in the hemisphere.”^{xcvii} But the Trump administration has doubled down on this view. In April 2019, current National Security Advisor, John Bolton, boasted “proudly” that the Monroe Doctrine is “alive and well” in a speech announcing new punitive measures toward Cuba.^{xcviii}

Washington's current attempts to bend Havana to its will are viewed by many countries in Latin America as evidence that it still clings to a hemispheric framework detached from reality, one that disregards the zeitgeist of the region. Since 2000, more and more countries have been openly challenging Washington's position toward the island, which has, at some points, translated into outright antagonism.^{xcix} Solid partnerships are difficult to achieve when such conditions prevail. William LeoGrande and Eric Hershberg, two preeminent scholars on U.S.-Cuba relations, argue that with fresh approach toward Havana, however, “...[G]reater space

[would be] opened up for cooperation between Washington and counterparts in the hemisphere around shared objectives in the hemisphere.”^c Furthermore, unilateral normalization would not only signify a policy pivot to Cuba and the rest of Latin America, but it would also begin the process of reframing how Washington itself views its southern neighbors. Both are necessary for progress.

Unilaterally normalizing relations would build a foundation of trust from which substantial efforts to address regional issues can commence, benefitting U.S. national interests. This centers on the notion of mitigating risks. Perpetual instability—stemming from economic woes, systemic violence, corruption, migration, and others—ensures the continued existence of threats, which is especially true given the geographical proximity of these vulnerable areas to the United States.

In tandem with regional counterparts, Washington can endeavor to identify and target the root factors of systemic poverty and inequality, which frequently contribute to political unrest and migration. The catastrophic consequences of these issues are embodied in Venezuela’s current crisis, where the populace’s growing economic desperation has displaced millions and created a situation that threatens to devolve into an international proxy war.^{ci} Washington can also cooperate with partners throughout the region to build stronger institutions to better withstand corruption. From Mexico, through the Northern Triangle, to the Caribbean islands, and down through South America, “endemic” corruption has led to political upheaval, violence, forced migration, famine, and a host of complications that have directly affected the United States in the past.^{cii} A comprehensive and multilateral approach to combat violence, especially that which stems from the narcotics trade, could improve security throughout the hemisphere, mitigate issues along the southern border and ports of entry, and alleviate the domestic illicit

drug epidemic.^{ciii} Better engagement from Washington on all of these aforementioned issues will naturally mitigate the ongoing crisis in human displacement in much of Latin America; the most significant factors compelling individuals to uproot their lives have been “...[S]tructural inequality, grinding poverty, corrosive impunity and spiraling criminal violence.”^{civ}

United States has a lot to gain from improving relations with Latin America. “Yet because of lack of trust... the United States and Latin America have rarely developed a genuine and sustained partnership to address regional—let alone global—challenges... If a hemispheric partnership remains elusive, the costs to the United States and its neighbors will be high, in terms of both growing risks and missed opportunities.”^{cv} As the scholars from the Brookings Center pointed out, U.S. policies toward Cuba “...[H]ave hindered Washington’s ability to work constructively in other countries” in the region.^{cvi} Thus, by removing this major stumbling block, the United States can begin building coalitions with counterparts to work in concert toward addressing the fundamental causes of instability in the region. It does not guarantee such an outcome, but unilateral normalization with Cuba creates a much better possibility to do so current policy. In this way, it is in the national interests of the United States.

Economic and Trade

In a 2016 study on trade with Cuba, the United States International Trade Commission determined: “Absent U.S. restrictions, U.S. exports in several sectors would likely increase somewhat in the short term, with prospects for larger increases in the longer term...”^{cvii} This is not necessarily groundbreaking. It stands to reason that unilaterally normalizing relations—which, for this section, entails lifting the embargo and all its associated trade restrictions—would increase exports to a country with which normal commercial relations have never existed. The

important question is: how much? In other words, do the economic benefits gained from unilateral normalization justify the effort? In a word, yes. That is not to say that the economic benefits to the United States of such a measure are enormous. Cuba is an island of eleven million people—not a large market comparatively. However, when juxtaposed with the current trade dynamic, the advantage is more apparent. True, its market is small, but it is relatively untapped because of the restrictions imposed upon the island. Also, given its proximity to the United States and a large portion of Cuban-Americans in South Florida and elsewhere in the country, Cuba is a natural economic partner for the United States. In this section, the benefits of unilateral normalization with Havana are concrete and quantifiable: the United States and its farmers, businesses, and entrepreneurs are losing out on potential profits. Thus, in economic terms, it is in the national interests of the United States to pursue such a policy.

Current commercial barriers are detrimental to the United States. The policy is preventing significant activity—valued in the billions for U.S. businesses—from taking place. According to the C.I.A., Cuba imported over \$11 billion in goods and services and exported just over \$2 billion in 2017.^{cviii} In this disparity lies opportunity for U.S. partners. In 2017, the United States exported a meager \$291 million Cuba, accounting for less than five percent of its overall imports.^{cix} With the exception of Mexico and Venezuela, Cuba’s largest trading partners are all outside the hemisphere, and the products those far-flung partners provide in the largest quantities are those with which the United States is well-endowed, including foodstuffs, machinery and equipment, chemicals, and fossil fuels.^{cx}

In nearly every economic sector, the United States pays the price from its current policies. Individuals, businesses, state governments, and the federal government all miss out on economic opportunity. The United States composed a tiny fraction of Cuba’s agricultural

imports, although “U.S. exporters enjoy advantages compared with major competitors, including the close proximity of U.S. ports to Cuba and lower shipping costs, which would allow them to be highly price competitive...”^{cxix} It is estimated that because of the embargo, the State of Minnesota by itself is deprived of nearly \$200 million in agricultural exports alone.^{cxii} For one industry in one state, that is a significant figure. When extrapolated across multiple sectors and multiple states, the gravity of economic loss from the current state of relations across the Florida Straits is manifested. In fact, a 2016 study by the United States International Trade Commission forecast that terminating U.S. restrictions on the island would result in a multi-billion dollar increase in aggregate agricultural and manufactured exports.^{cxiii} In addition, there are a variety of other areas—tourism, transportation, infrastructure, technology, healthcare—where little to no connections exist, so the magnitude of potential economic benefits is simply unknown. The bottom line is, with the embargo in place, the United States is precluded from competing in Cuba’s market, essentially robbing itself, its citizens, and its businesses of the profits of a normal commercial relationship.

The years immediately following December 2014 offer a glimpse of the economic benefits of improved relations between Havana and Washington. It is important to note that this “flurry of economic activity” occurred not as a result full-stop normalization, but rather an incomplete and tenuous arrangement.^{cxiv} The embargo remained intact, and its restrictions limited the extent to which commercial ties between Cuba and the United States could be developed in 2015 and 2016. Despite this, dozens of major U.S. companies, including Starwood Hotels, Carnival cruise lines, Airbnb, PayPal, Google, eight separate airline companies, and many more, entered the island’s market.^{cxv}

Starwood Hotels' admission into Cuba's service industry, in which it acquired management rights to three of Havana's luxury hotels, was characterized by its CEO, Thomas Mangas, as "...[O]nly the beginning" of what he predicted to be "...[A] huge attraction for U.S. consumers..."^{cxvi} In less than two years since the thaw, Cuba went from unranked to the ninth most popular destination for Airbnb travelers, and it was the "...[F]astest-growing country in the world..." for the company.^{cxvii} The thaw opened the door for Google to sign an agreement to install servers on the island and improve connectivity, becoming "...[T]he first foreign internet company to host content within the long cut-off country."^{cxviii} Google has continued to push for increasing connectivity across the Florida Straits, but efforts have been hampered by the Trump Administration's about-face in U.S.-Cuba policy.^{cxix} In February 2016, the Department of Transportation began allowing twenty daily round-trip flights to Havana for airline companies from the United States, and by August of the same year, all the available slots were filled.^{cxx} Although the "...[T]he competition to serve the Caribbean was fierce," many of the companies grew wary after Trump's election and suspended their services.^{cxxi} Although the economic potential across the Florida Straits was on display in the two short years following the Thaw, Trump's election also revealed that that potential can be quickly mitigated if the effort is not complete.

In the end, only complete, unilateral normalization by the United States can safeguard the economic benefits enabled by such an arrangement in the long-term. The advantages are evident. In some areas, they may be rooted in speculation and forecasting. In many, however, the years between the thaw and Donald Trump's election offer a concrete glimpse at the significant opportunities made possible by an improved relationship. Businesses across the country could capitalize on a market hungry for change and in need of investment from partners with the

capacity of those in the United States. The numbers speak for themselves; there are billions of dollars in potential exports and services that the United States is currently unable to take advantage of.^{cxxii} Unilateral normalization would remove the most significant barriers to trade across the Florida Straits. In this way, it is in the economic interests of the United States to pursue such a policy toward Cuba.

Transnational Issues

Despite ongoing tensions since 1959, Cuba and the United States have—perhaps surprisingly—cooperated with one another on addressing a range of transnational issues. Even during U.S. administrations that were more outwardly hostile to the Cuban Government—Nixon, Reagan, and the first and second Bush—there was, mostly due to geographic proximity, a need for dialogue. Washington recognized that failing to do so would not only be counter to the national interests but could also be dangerous. Nonetheless, animosity across the Florida Straits has frequently resulted in disaster. On most of these occasions, the issues arose from or were exacerbated by the simple fact that the governments lacked a framework through which to cooperate with one another. In a world that faces an increasing barrage of transnational issues—whether migration, the drug trade, terrorism, climate change and environmental problems, or something else—it is imperative for the global community—especially neighbors—to work in concert to address them. The unilateral normalization advocated by this paper would manifest Washington’s intentions toward Cuba and create the foundation of trust from which both countries can begin to tackle the problems that transcend their borders and ideologies. In this regard, such a move is in the national interests of the United States.

Migration from Cuba is one of these. It has been a major concern for the United States in the past. Since 1959, millions of Cubans have immigrated to the U.S., many of them settling in South Florida.^{cxxiii} In some cases—particularly the Mariel Boatlift of 1980 and the Balsero Crisis of 1994—it became a humanitarian crisis that strained U.S. resources and caused considerable political repercussions. During Mariel, over 125,000 Cubans left their homeland for the United States in less than seventh months, forcing the Carter administration to scramble to stop the flow of refugees and facilitate their safe passage and resettlement.^{cxxiv} Less than two decades later, 1994 saw over 35,000 Cubans attempting to cross the Florida Straits on makeshift rafts, whose precarious travel arrangements required the Clinton administration to mobilize and rescue thousands at sea.^{cxxv}

Both episodes spiraled out of control because of the animosity between Washington and Havana—dangerous situations enabled by the political posturing of the two rivals.^{cxxvi} Both were also resolved by sustained dialogue, which in the case of 1994, led to a substantial change in U.S. immigration policy: the institution of the wet foot, dry foot. It attempted to curtail illegal immigration from increasing visa quotas for Cubans and by returning any Cuban intercepted at sea to their homeland or to a third country.^{cxxvii} It is clear that Clinton and his advisors viewed another such crisis as serious enough to warrant a policy overhaul, which caused considerable political blowback for the administration.^{cxxviii} The potential of mass migration from Cuba to the United States continues to pose a security threat, especially if conditions on the island were to become volatile.

Illegal drug trafficking is another problem. A major conduit for narcotics entering the United States has been and continues to be the Caribbean. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) offers the following assessment of the region:

“The geographic proximity of the Caribbean Islands makes them extremely vulnerable to drug trafficking. Historically, significant quantities of cocaine destined for the U.S. transited the Caribbean. The illegal drug trade remains a menace to the public welfare and represents a serious threat to the rule of law in many Caribbean island nations.”^{cxxxix}

The U.S. Coast Guard regularly intercepts large drugs shipments in the Caribbean bound for American ports, with busts weighing tens-of-thousands of pounds and valuing in the hundreds-of-millions of dollars fairly commonplace.^{cxxx} As the largest island in the region, Cuba’s territorial waters are vast and “[S]erve as a transshipment zone for US- and European-bound drugs.”^{cxxxi} There has been evidence that the island of Cuba has served as a facilitator of drug traffic from South America to the United States since the 1960’s, a reality that gained international attention when several of Cuba’s prominent military officials were executed in the late 1980’s for involvement in the enterprise.^{cxxxii} Through the 1990’s and early 2000’s, however, Cuba, despite its tenuous relationship with the United States, provided key intelligence to U.S. narcotics agencies and seized hundreds of tons of drugs en route to its northern neighbor during that time.^{cxxxiii}

Recently, there has been a resurgence of trafficking activity around Cuba’s over 3,500 miles of coastline, and in 2017, Cuban officials claimed to have intercepted over three times the amount of illegal drugs bound for the United States than the previous year.^{cxxxiv} Cuban officials predict that with President Trump’s pivot in U.S.-Cuba relations, reduced bilateral cooperation to counter the narcotics trade “[W]ill be felt in the US,” especially given the revitalization of Caribbean smuggling routes.^{cxxxv} Thus, Cuba’s vast territorial waters, central location in the Caribbean, and proximity to South Florida combine to make it a powerful potential ally for the United States in combating the flow of illegal drugs to its borders.

Over the years, animosity between Washington and Havana has created space for terrorism and tragedy. There were numerous occasions throughout this sixty-year standoff when both the U.S. and Cuba could have cooperated with one another to avert, mitigate, or, at the very least, obtain justice for the victims of violence, but political posturing has often trumped the rule of law and safety of citizens.

In 1976, a bomb exploded on a Cubana Airlines flight from Barbados to Havana, killing all 73 passengers onboard.^{cxxxvi} Recently declassified CIA documents revealed that some of the alleged perpetrators of this act of terrorism had ties to the Agency, which, despite possessing some knowledge of a possible attack, did nothing to intercede.^{cxxxvii} Although some of them were also implicated in a string of hotel bombings throughout the island years later, they were never prosecuted for any related charges and lived-out the rest of their lives in Miami.^{cxxxviii}

In 1977, a woman named Joanne Chesimard was sentenced to life in prison for, among other infractions, the murder of a New Jersey State Trooper. Subsequently, she escaped from prison, was located in Cuba in 1984, and has been on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorist list ever since.^{cxxxix} Cuba has denied her extradition to the United States to face the consequences of her crimes.^{cxl}

The 1996 Brothers to the Rescue disaster, which ended with two destroyed planes, four dead Cuban-Americans, and a national security crisis, was the result of a tragic failure to enforce the law.^{cxli} Officials high in the United States government knew in advance of the danger of such flyovers, but regardless, they were allowed to continue. In fact, Sandy Berger, President Clinton's National Security Advisor, received a foreboding email just days before the incident:

“Previous overflights by Jose Basulto of the Brothers have been met with restraint by Cuban authorities. Tensions are sufficiently high within Cuba, however, that we fear this may finally tip the Cubans toward an attempt to shoot down or force down the plane.”^{cxlii}

“[T]he shoot-down generated a full-scale crisis” within the United States government, leading Clinton and his advisors to seriously consider military retaliation.^{cxliii} The cases of Cubana Airlines, Joanne Chesimard, and the Brothers to the Rescue are just three of countless examples when tensions between both countries have jeopardized the safety of both of their citizens.

With the onslaught of climate change, transnational cooperation on environmental issues is becoming increasingly important. This is especially true for the United States and Cuba considering their significant, shared maritime border. The Obama administration recognized this in late 2015 when it signed an agreement with the Cuban Government “...[T]o strengthen cooperation and address the causes and effects of climate change...”^{cxliv} It identified specific areas in which coordination would be crucial, including oil spills, natural disasters, and damage to coral reefs and other marine life.^{cxlv} Although the benefits of this arrangement should be self-evident in terms of risk-reduction, it was created on the basis of prevention, which inherently involves some speculation regarding its potential benefits.

In one area, however, the dangers of failing to pursue environmental cooperation are imminent and monumental. The *Deepwater Horizon* oil rig explosion in 2010 was a catastrophe for the Gulf of Mexico and those states bordering it, spewing 4 million barrels of oil into the sea and causing economic damage estimated in the tens-of-billions.^{cxlvi} The repercussions to the environment, economy, and the health of individuals in the affected areas was so bad that President Obama labeled it, “...[T]he worst environmental disaster America has ever faced.”^{cxlvii} An incident on such a scale in Cuban waters, which contain significant oil reserves that are being tapped at a growing rate, would be even more devastating.^{cxlviii} The United States has a much better capacity to respond to an oil spill than Cuba—a fact that combines with its close proximity to render it an essential clean-up partner. The current state of relations between Havana and

Washington would prevent the coordination of the quick and massive response necessary to mitigate the enormous damage of a spill off Cuba's coast.^{cxlix} The same applies to other natural disasters, such as hurricanes (although the U.S. and Cuba do at least share hurricane prediction information), that bring destruction to the region. Thus, current U.S. policy is not only counter to a necessary global effort to work in concert to safeguard the environment, but it also exposes many of its southern states to serious risk.

Unilaterally normalizing relations with Havana would not instantly solve the plethora of transnational issues facing the United States in the Caribbean, but it would create the possibility to begin working toward solutions and mitigating risks. It is no surprise that the Obama Administration pursued bilateral agreements in each of the aforementioned areas—migration, narcotics trafficking, terrorism, and the environment—in its efforts following the thaw. All four pose dangers, and as the Trump Administration continues to retreat from the frameworks of his predecessor, the risks they pose become all the more salient. The United States cannot address these existential problems alone; it needs a network of countries and organizations to do so. Given Cuba's location, it could be a natural and effective partner in this wider network. In this way, enhanced cooperation with Havana on issues of immigration, narcotrafficking, terrorism, and the environment is vital. Unilateral normalization would remove many of the barriers preventing Havana and Washington from working together to address them. Thus, in terms of mitigating transnational issues, it is in the interests of the United States.

Conclusion: Inherent Benefits

Ultimately, this section aims to illuminate all of the inherent advantages of unilateral normalization with Cuba. Washington must consider the broader geopolitical implications of

Russia and China's increased activities in Cuba; it must be concerned about stabilizing the hemisphere; it should carefully examine the economic potential of commercial ties with the Cuba; and it cannot disregard or minimize the transnational threats it currently faces in the Caribbean. The need to appraise and address these issues is urgent. The United States exposes itself to serious risks and precludes significant rewards by failing to do so. Standing alone, each of the aforementioned categories make a compelling case for normalization, but in the aggregate, they form an essential one. Encapsulated in this one relationship with a small, island nation are much larger elements of how the United States can defend its interests on in the global arena. Of course, unilateral normalization does not guarantee all of the benefits identified in this section. It does, however, enable the United States to capitalize on them, whereas the current dynamic does not.

Conclusions

“Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or the present are sure to miss the future.”^{cl} Nearly sixty years ago, President Kennedy understood the importance of resisting the tendency to allow comfort in the familiar to define our decisions. As it was then, it remains imperative for Washington to continuously monitor the effectiveness of its policies. The vitality of the United States depends on the willingness and ability of its leaders to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of their actions. This is especially true in terms of foreign policy, as developments abroad are increasingly complex, rapid, and pertinent to the country's security. Washington must be attuned to this. Simply put, when the pros of maintaining the status quo are outweighed by the cons, it is time for a change. Moreover, if the risks of maintaining the status quo are greater than those associated with an alternative, it is time for a change. In regard to the

United States' current relationship with Cuba, there is a strong evidence that both are true. Therefore, there is strong evidence that it is in the national interests of the United States to unilaterally normalize relations with Cuba. That is, Washington should lift the embargo, acknowledge the Cuban Government as legitimate, cease efforts to alter its institutions and frameworks, and establish normal diplomatic ties on an equal footing to capitalize on the benefits such an arrangement will afford.

Some will argue that this would be giving-in to a government that has not only repeatedly defied the will of the United States, but been openly and dangerously hostile. While it is true that Havana has made transgressions against the so-called "Yanqui imperialists," labeling such a move as acquiescence is dubious at best. First of all, if an action brings about a more favorable set of circumstances than those at present, how can that be considered, as former Assistant Secretary of State, Roger Noriega, asserted, "a total capitulation?"^{cli} There are a host of advantages to be gained and risks to be mitigated from unilateral normalization, none of which are available through a policy of isolation and coercion.

Second, are the political implications of rapprochement with Havana really so monumental as to demand concessions in return? Washington has been so fixed on a losing effort for so long that the reality of the situation has been distorted by a sunk-cost bias. This at least partially explains why U.S. officials have been so hesitant to move decisively to normalize relations with Cuba; the perceived political drawbacks are clouding the actual, concrete advantages. The United States is a major world power. Cuba is an island a fraction of the size. If anything, unilateral normalization should reveal that Washington's policies are not hostage to a country with considerably less influence in the international community. Furthermore, if it is indeed the goal of the United States to restructure Cuba's domestic frameworks and

institutions—which is a completely separate argument—there are nearly six decades of proof that a policy of coercion and demanding concessions is futile. After all, former Assistant Secretary of State Noriega claimed that “No matter what the U.S. does it doesn’t move the needle in Cuba.”^{clii} Thus, the argument that unilateral normalization by the United States somehow represents a defeat is one that is rooted in suspect logic.

Some will also argue that it would validate a system of governance that allows political prisoners, suppresses freedom of speech, quashes dissent, and partakes in other human rights violations. This contention must be taken more seriously. It is true that the Cuban people are relegated by their government to a life of restrictions. What they can say and do, where they can go, how they can live, what they can learn, who they can elect as their leaders; many aspects of life are limited. That much is true. The goal of the United States should be to try to remedy human suffering wherever it exists, which includes working to remedy the unfavorable aspects of its island neighbor. Not only is it morally correct, but it is also good foreign policy.

In this case, however, Washington has pursued a punitive policy that has done very little to actually improve life for people on the island. As Mr. Noriega astutely asserted, the United States cannot hope to change Cuba’s internal conditions, and it is both futile and counterproductive to continue to try. In the words of Miguel Fraga, First Secretary of the Cuban Embassy to the United States, “The Embargo doesn’t hurt the Cuban Government; it hurts the Cuban people.”^{cliii} As proposed in this paper, unilateral normalization would remove all barriers to the island’s prosperity imposed by the United States, shifting the onus for change squarely on the Cuban Government. From there, it is up to Cubans to change, internally, what they don’t like about a system that will now be more integrated into the world economy, be more open to outside ideas, and be more accountable to international pressures—just like nearly every other

nation in the global community. Thus, unilateral normalization would likely ameliorate some of the conditions that give its critics pause, and it is unlikely to exacerbate them.

Where the drawbacks are limited, the potential benefits are significant. Importantly, none of them are able to be capitalized on with the current state of relations. The policy of the United States to attempt to isolate and coerce Cuba into submission has done nothing but run counter to the country's national interests. It has allowed China and Russia to expand their footholds in the United States' backyard; it has enabled instability and harmed relationships throughout the Western Hemisphere; it has hamstrung economic opportunity across the Florida Straits; and it has increased the danger of transnational threats to the country. With rapprochement, however, the capacity to address each of these areas increases significantly. The United States can challenge Beijing and Moscow's Western Hemisphere adventurism; it can repair relationships across Latin America and create critical partnerships to reduce instability; it can establish commercial ties to a market with serious potential for U.S. businesses; and it can work alongside Cuba to more effectively confront some of the existential challenges—migration, narcotics trafficking, terrorism, and environmental concerns—facing both countries. Altogether, the combination of the benefits derived from each of these four categories creates a compelling case for improving relations.

Unilateral normalization is the best way for Washington to secure these advantages. By doing so, the quid pro quo framework that has characterized negotiations between both countries until now can be bypassed. Without fail, this method—requiring the extraction of concessions that threatened the Cuban Government's bottom-line—has caused bilateral discussions to either grind to halt or has failed to secure lasting change. No matter the intentions, those Presidents who made the greatest push to redefine relations with Cuba—Carter, Clinton, and Obama—each

fell short. By reframing the issue to emphasize the national interests, however, the preoccupation with achieving politically-symbolic victories is removed from the equation. It then becomes a rational calculation of benefits and risks. This makes sweeping measures to lift the embargo, acknowledging the Cuban Government as legitimate, ceasing efforts to alter its institutions and frameworks, and establishing normal diplomatic ties on an equal footing much easier to pursue and defend. If they are depicted in such a way that they maximize rewards and minimize risks, other considerations—correctly so—become of secondary importance.

The best foreign policy for the future involves unilateral normalization with Cuba. It is consistent with the national interests of the United States. The point of this paper is not to roadmap *how* to go about doing this, but rather, *why* it should even be considered in the first place. The bottom line is, there is a wide array of substantial pros of such a policy change, compared to minor cons. This should be a primary consideration in any foreign policy deliberation, not a tertiary one. In this way, this paper endeavors to challenge the traditional lens through which U.S.-Cuba relations have been viewed. In doing so, it uses this bilateral relationship as a case study to advocate for a specific approach to all matters in foreign policy—one that resists entrapment by substantively minor, political concerns. Washington should always strive to maximize its foreign policy dividends, and therefore, it must always ensure that it objectively takes stock of their ramifications. It is clear the United States is not employing this method in regard to Cuba, so, to safeguard its national interests abroad, a swift and decisive change in policy is needed. In the end, Cuba is just one piece of a vast and complex international community with which the United States must interact, but despite that, it is essential as an index to understand how Washington is conducting its business abroad. As of now, relations with Cuba

reveal an outdated, misguided, and downright detrimental approach to foreign policy, one that must be amended if the United States is to remain competitive on the world stage.

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