
Diverse and influential group calls on Obama to open up to Cuba

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The petition calls for loosening restrictions on travel permits for American citizens and for sending remittances to the Caribbean nation. It also urges the government to push for closer commercial relations. Various Cuban-American organizations have presented similar measures before. This time, however, the call is coming from a group of people with more authority. Some of them are former members of the Obama administration, with knowledge of and experience in diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba.

One of the signatories, Jeffrey Davidow, was Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs (1996-1998) under the Clinton administration. Davidow later served as ambassador to Venezuela and Mexico. He was Obama's advisor at the 2009 Summit of the Americas, where the president announced a series of measures to reach out to Cuba. "It's an important letter because it has a new focus," Davidow explains. "For many years most of the debate has been between those who wanted to extend the embargo and those who did not. Now, this has become a moot point because there will be no changes in the embargo in the short run because that would require congressional approval."

Bush Sr. and Bush Jr., Clinton and members of the Obama administration are among the petition's sponsors

The document avoids the "ideological debate" and calls on Obama to take "specific steps" to expand on what he did in 2009 – steps the president could take by executive order without going through Congress. A few months after he took office, Obama approved loosening restrictions on remittances and family trips. He also expanded the options for Americans to travel to the island. This rapprochement, however, hit a roadblock when the American contractor Alan Gross was arrested in Cuba in 2009. His release has been a non-negotiable condition for further engagement with Havana.

The petition, sponsored by a number of organizations such as the Cuba Study Group and the Council of the

Americas, applauds the impact of those measures because they promoted “direct contact” between citizens of both countries and strengthened civil society in Cuba. The signatories, however, feel that the situation has evolved and that it now requires Washington to take new steps forward. They also ask for the US government to keep pressing Cuba on human rights.

The sponsors of the letter say Obama has “an unprecedented opportunity” because, according to a survey published in February, the majority of Americans favor changing the policy toward Cuba. They also warn the president that “the window of opportunity” could close and that the United States is getting “increasingly isolated internationally in its Cuba policy.” The petition highlights the rapprochement efforts of most Latin American countries in the last few months. The embargo remains the main point of disagreement between the United States and the region.

Arturo Valenzuela, former head of the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs at the State Department under Obama (2009-2011) and Alexander Watson, who held the post under the Clinton administration (1993-1996), also joined the petition. They are among the many Democrats who sponsored the document, including the current chief of the Brookings Institution, Strobe Talbott, who was once Deputy Secretary of State.

The novelty of the document lies in its plurality of voices. These include influential figures from outside of the Democratic Party. John Negroponte, the former director of national intelligence and then deputy secretary of state under the Bush administrations (2001-2009), lent his authority to the letter. Charles Shapiro, former Bush ambassador to Venezuela and current president of the Institute of the Americas, also signed the list of recommendations. Other signatories include former officials from the United States Interests Section in Havana who worked for President George Bush and his son, President George W. Bush.

This consensus among former members of the US government from both major parties comes just as a bipartisan movement to engage with Cuba is starting to grow. Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy and Republican Senator Jeff Flake are leading the charge. They advocate taking unilateral action, despite the heated debate this topic inspires on Capitol Hill, even within the Democratic camp.

The petition received support from high-ranking military officers. John Adams, former Deputy United States Military Representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and former George W. Bush intelligence advisor sponsored the petition. James Stavridi, who served as NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (2009-2013) and as former chief of the US Southern Command, also gave his support.

The letter warns Obama that the US is increasingly “isolated” in its Cuba policy

George Weiksner, Vice President of Crédit Suisse and the sugarcane tycoon of Cuban descent Andrés Fanjul – who called for a revision of US policy toward Cuba a few years ago – also signed the document. A Dominican businessman of Venezuelan ancestry, Gustavo Cisneros, joined the group. The well-known Venezuelan analyst Moisés Naim, who works at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, also backed the petition.

A few days ago, [various religious organizations pressed the White House to loosen restrictions on Cuba](#). Deputy Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roberta Jacobson and General Director of the United States Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Cuba Josefina Vidal met in Washington. According to a State Department representative, the US government pressed for Gross' release at the meeting. Cuba, on the other hand, has tied the American's fate to the liberation of three Cuban nationals who were convicted of espionage in the United States.

The letter arrives just a few weeks after Washington reviewed and kept Cuba on its list of state sponsors of terror. State Secretary John Kerry has said that his department is still “evaluating” its policy toward the island. He insisted that the “the most effective tool” would be to “build stronger ties” between Cubans and Americans. Less than two months ago it was revealed that the US government had secretly funded the creation of a social network in 2009 to promote political change in Cuba.

List of recommendations

1. Expand travel to Cuba

This measure calls for Obama to increase professional-exchange programs in any sector that supports independent economic activity, expand travel permits for NGOs and academic institutions and allow them to open Cuban bank accounts. It also recommends allowing American travelers to have access to prepaid cards and other financial services.

2. Increase support for Cuban civil society

The letter urges the president to allow unlimited remittances. The US government currently limits remittances for non-family members. The petition also calls for establishing new licenses to provide professional services in Cuba and to increase the import-export business. The signatories recommend allowing Cuban entrepreneurs to participate in internships in the United States. They suggest allowing American institutions to issue scholarships to Cuban students for study. The petition proposes loosening restrictions on sale and transactions of telecommunications equipment.

3. Prioritize engagement in areas of interest

The letter asks the Obama administration to engage in bilateral discussions on mutual security and human rights concerns. They recommend leveraging the dialogue to press for the release of Alan Gross and press for improvement of human rights.

4. Provide financial assurances

Lastly, the petition asks the administration to assure the authority of financial institutions to process all financial transactions compliant with their licenses.
